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# The Critical Eye: Re-Viewing 1970s Television

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# THE CRITICAL EYE: RE-VIEWING 1970S TELEVISION

by

KAREN PETRUSKA

Under the Direction of Dr. Alisa Perren

## ABSTRACT

In my dissertation entitled “The Critical Eye: Re-Viewing 1970s Television,” I argue that TV scholars would benefit greatly by engaging in a more nuanced consideration of the television critic’s industrial position as a key figure of negotiation. As such, critical discourse has often been taken for granted in scholarship without attention to how this discourse may obscure contradictions implicit within the TV industry and the critic’s own identity as both an insider and an outsider to the television business. My dissertation brings the critic to the fore, employing the critic as a lens through which I view television aesthetics, media policy, and technology. This study is grounded in the disciplines of television studies, media industries studies, new media studies, and cultural studies. Yet because the critic’s writing reflects the totality of television as an entertainment and public service medium, the significance of this study

expands beyond disciplinary concerns to a reconsideration of the impact of television upon American culture.

This project offers a history of the television critic during the 1970s, a decade in which the field of criticism professionalized and expanded dramatically.

Methodologically, I am incorporating three approaches, including historical research of the 1970s television industry, textual analysis of critical writing, and interviews with critics working during that decade. I've identified the 1970s for a variety of reasons, including its parallels with today's significant technological and industrial transformations. My central texts will be the industry trade publications, *Variety* and *Broadcasting*, and national daily newspapers including the *New York Times*, *Los Angeles Times*, *Washington Post*, and *Chicago Tribune*. Viewing TV criticism as a profession, a historical source, and a site of scholarly analysis, this project offers a series of interventions, including a consideration of how critical writing may serve as a primary source for historians and how television studies has overlooked the significance of the critic as an object of analysis in his/her own right.

INDEX WORDS: Television studies, Media industry studies, Cultural studies, Television criticism, Media history

THE CRITICAL EYE: RE-VIEWING 1970S TELEVISION

by

KAREN PETRUSKA

A Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

2012



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2012

THE CRITICAL EYE: RE-VIEWING 1970S TELEVISION

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## **DEDICATION**

For my father, who has been waiting a long time for me to become the next Dr. Petruska.  
And for my partner, who endured with grace and generosity all that it took for me to finish.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Coming to Georgia State was among the best decisions of my life. The program's rigor challenged me, the support of the faculty encouraged me, and the friendship of my cohort sustained me. Among the faculty who helped shape this project and my identity as a scholar are Kathy Fuller-Seeley, Ted Friedman, Greg Smith, Angelo Restivo, Jennifer Barker, Mary Stuckey, and Alessandra Raengo. To them, I say thank you for having your door always open. Special thanks also to Horace Newcomb, who shared with me his vast experience, his contacts, and his conversation. Thanks also to Nedda Ahmed, world's most helpful and fun librarian. My mentor, Alisa Perren, gave endlessly of her time and knowledge. She read everything I ever wrote while at Georgia State, and I always knew that her advice would make my work better. Without Alisa, I would not have identified the deep passion of my intellectual life—the study of television—and for that I am deeply grateful. Years from now, when fellow scholars read my work and spot evidence of my training under her, I'll be proud to be known as “one of Alisa's.”

A number of critics and reporters writing in the 1970s or early 1980s were kind enough to talk with me, and their contributions to how I have conceived of the critic as an industrial figure have been immeasurable. Thanks to Howard Rosenberg, Tom Shales, Erik Mink, David Bianculli, Joe Flint, Lee Margulies, and Noel Holston. You were all incredibly generous with your time and with your memories. I hope I have reflected your work fairly—I've enjoyed seeing television through your eyes. My committee, Kathy, Greg, Ted, and Horace Newcomb worked with me throughout this process, helping me to refine my vision and to find the most important questions about how TV criticism matters to television scholarship. I am very grateful for their advice and encouragement.

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My path to an academic career has led me through St. Louis, Louisville, Chicago, Italy, Atlanta, and (soon) Boston. My parents have stood by me through all that change, all those moves including an adventure through the West Virginia mountains with a queen-sized bed (almost but not quite) falling off a minivan. They never stopped trusting that I knew what I was doing—even when I did not know myself what was next. I've lived an incredible life of education, art, and culture, and none of it would have been possible without them. Thanks to Mary for being my best friend, to Paul for being my kindred spirit, and to Brian for being my hero. I'm very lucky that you are my family. My new family, the Ayers, have welcomed me with open arms—my visits to Iowa have become a highlight of the summer and winter, and I look forward to the many visits to come. Macie and Cora, you give me joy—thanks for being my cuddle buddies. And to Drew, my partner in life, love, and learning, thank you for making dinner when I was working, for doing the routine when I was traveling, for formatting this dissertation when I needed to revise, and for introducing me to *Hell's Kitchen*, the best anti-stress program on TV. Quite simply, I love our life together.

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## 1 INTRODUCTION: THE PASSING OF THE BATON: TELEVISION CRITICISM IN THE 1970S

“When I was a little kid at my family breakfast table, my father would read the sports section and hand me the Entertainment section of the *Miami Herald*, and I would read the local TV critic—you know, Jack Anderson, and I would read *TV Guide* with Cleveland Amory, and since television meant a lot to me while I was very young, so did those guys. I really wanted to be a critic. It’s an odd thing...” ~David Bianculli, Television Critic<sup>1</sup>

If you had asked David Bianculli as a young man what he wanted to be when he grew up, he would have responded “TV critic.” Having read other critics in his daily newspaper and *TV Guide*, Bianculli developed a lifelong fascination with television. He was so committed to becoming a critic that when he entered college and found no established curriculum for his desired field, he consciously constructed a course progression that would prepare him for a career as a TV critic, taking such classes as statistics, creative writing, and critical analysis.<sup>2</sup> That Bianculli knew he wanted to become a TV critic was more than “odd,” the phrase he used in the quote above—it was genuinely novel when he was growing up in the 1960s. For the first generation of TV critics, those who wrote about television during the 1950s and 1960s, television criticism was less a vocation than an accident of circumstance.<sup>3</sup> As explained by *Chicago’s American* critic Janet Kern, there was no training to be a critic in 1959: “When I get letters asking for my qualifications as a television critic, I have a standing answer. I tell them I have the

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<sup>1</sup> David Bianculli, *Phone Interview* (2012).

<sup>2</sup> To this day, criticism tends to be a sub-field, a particular path someone who studies journalism or media studies might follow.

<sup>3</sup> “The Press: Measuring the Giant,” *Time*, November 9 1959.

four necessary qualifications for the job: a television set, a typewriter, a dictionary, and a job on a newspaper."<sup>4</sup> Bianculli represents the second generation of television critics, those for whom television had always existed and who followed in the footsteps of critics who had already been writing about television for twenty years. Bianculli's childhood decision to become a TV critic may be read as symbolic of television's maturity as a medium of increasing legitimacy—by the 1970s, it was possible that children would dream of growing up to be a TV critic.

At major newspapers across the U.S., the first generation of critics passed the baton to the next generation just starting their careers in the 1970s [See Table 1].<sup>5</sup> Bianculli secured his first job as a TV critic in the mid-1970s, and he was only one of many “young turks” entering the business of journalistic TV criticism at that time. For example, first-generation critic at the *Los Angeles Times* Cecil Smith, who had worked as the television critic for the *Times* since 1953, was joined by second-generation critic Howard Rosenberg in 1978, and the two worked side by side for the *Times* until Smith's retirement in 1982. At the *New York Times*, first-generation critic Jack Gould had written about broadcasting since 1944. Before retiring in 1972, he, too, overlapped with his successor, second-generation critic John J. O'Connor, for one year. Meanwhile, as the medium of television and profession of TV criticism both reached maturity in the 1970s, smaller papers began to hire full-time TV critics for the first time.<sup>6</sup> This moment of transition—from the first to the second generation of critics—has been scarcely remarked upon in television scholarship. This dissertation re-views the writings of critics in the 1970s to understand better not only how the critic has reported and evaluated television, but also how

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<sup>4</sup> Charles Steinberg, "The Compleat Television Critic," *Television Quarterly* 11, no. 2 (1974): 8-9.

<sup>5</sup> Having reached 87 percent national penetration in 1960, TV became a common appliance in houses throughout America. Michele Hilmes, *Only Connect: A Cultural History of Broadcasting in the United States*, 2nd ed. (Belmont: Thompson Wadsworth, 2007). 177.

<sup>6</sup> Some papers had employed critics who wrote about various media, but television became a beat for one individual more commonly in the 1970s.

scholars may better employ this figure in our research. The fundamental research question that drives this project inquires, “If we stop taking the critic for granted, what can this figure teach us about television’s history and how scholars write that history?”

To answer that question, I analyze television criticism from three perspectives. First, I consider criticism as a profession, a field defined by seemingly paradoxical responsibilities. For example, critics were employed by print publications, but they wrote about the television industry. They generally considered themselves journalists, but they also expressed subjective opinions in their role as evaluators of television. Their work therefore often offered unique insights into their personal stakes as commentators about such topics as media policy, technology, and business structure and operation. Second, I consider the critic as a source, employing the critic as a lens through which to understand the 1970s differently. This is a revisionist history, rethinking not only how scholars have described the key programs and challenges facing the television industry in the 1970s but also the methods applied by scholars to re-view the past. While scholars have frequently cited critical discourse as a secondary source, their use of the critic has overlooked the deeper complexity featured in critical work. Finally, I consider the critic as a site, examining the value of critical discourse for television studies. In their efforts to account for television as an entertainment medium, a regulated industry, a technology, and a cultural form, critical discourse shares particular preoccupations with TV scholarship. Television studies, as an academic discipline, developed in the 1970s, alongside critics’ efforts to professionalize their own field through the establishment of the Television Critics Association [TCA]. This decade, therefore, serves a particularly resonant moment through which to analyze the parallels and divergences between critical and scholarly writing, to better identify how scholars and critics may work together to understand and critique TV.

## 1.1 TV Criticism as a Profession

Television criticism, like the medium itself, arose from the days of radio broadcasting. Yet interest in television criticism grew dramatically during the early years of its emergence; a 1955 study, for example, revealed that space allotted for television coverage in newspapers increased five hundred percent between 1953 and 1955.<sup>7</sup> When the TV quiz show scandal erupted at the same time, exposing the corruption within the industry, this crisis reinforced the need for critics to engage in a productive critique of television.<sup>8</sup> For most critics living outside New York and Los Angeles, the early history of broadcasting criticism in the 1950s and 1960s primarily featured critics watching television in real time along with audiences and reviewing programs after they aired.<sup>9</sup> Closed-circuit and taped television offered occasional opportunities for critics to view programs in advance of their airing, but it was not until 1969 that the CBS network issued a policy of consistent previewing for their major primetime program premieres.<sup>10</sup> Following CBS's decision, NBC nevertheless refused to offer previews for years, so the adoption of previewing was gradual and uneven. Critics also disagreed about the value of pre-reviews,

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<sup>7</sup> Frank Henry Frakes, Jr., "A Study of Standards Imposed by Four Leading Television Critics with Respect to Live Television Drama" (Doctoral Dissertation, Ohio State University, 1960). Frakes offers a brief history of broadcasting criticism, beginning in the 1920s. Lichty develops another early history of broadcasting to frame his content analysis of the writing of Jack Gould, Lawrence L. Lichty, "What Does a Television Critic Write About?," *Journal of Broadcasting* 7(1962-1963). See also Patrick D. Hazard, "TV Criticism - A Prehistory," *Television Quarterly* 2, no. 4 (1963).

<sup>8</sup> The quiz show scandal actually helped critics fight back against a series of articles that documented antagonism within the television industry towards critics, as when *Time* observed that despite their negativity, critical work lacked practical use, having failed to unearth the corruption at the heart of TV operations. "Critics Be Damned," *Sponsor*, November 1957; Eric Sevareid, "Harsh Words for TV Critics," *The Reporter*, July 10 1958; Bob Stahl, "What Good are Television Critics?," *TV Guide*, January 24 1959; Jack Gould, "Where TV Critics Strike Out," *New York Times*, May 19 1957; Jack Gould, "TV Under Assault," *New York Times*, June 22 1958.

<sup>9</sup> This explains the famous joke by Jackie Gleason that critics reported traffic accidents to eye witnesses.

<sup>10</sup> As the number one station, CBS perhaps felt intimidated by the possibility of negative reviews, but an article by Jack Gould surmised that CBS knew previewing could function as an appeasement of government saber-rattling about questionable content by giving an audience a chance to make informed programming decisions. Jack Gould, "The Critic May Have His Day," *New York Times*, April 6 1969; Les Brown, "Critics Mixed, NBC Totally Opposed as CBS Ushers In Pre-Screenings," *Variety*, April 23 1969.

concerned they would undermine the importance of live TV and make it more difficult for critics to account for the long-form of the television narrative.<sup>11</sup> There was little consistency about which programs were available for pre-review and critics' access to advanced copies of programs varied across the nation's papers. Nevertheless, previewing, in essence, transformed critics into privileged viewers of television, able to influence audience-viewing practices. CBS's announcement in 1969 therefore forced critics to revisit key questions about their relationship with the television networks and with their audience. Fundamentally, the ability to preview a program altered the critic's relationship with the audience because they no longer watched TV *with* their readers but instead enjoyed privileged access to programs that distinguished critics from their readers in new ways.

The 1970s also marked a moment of professionalization and legitimation for TV critics. The first Pulitzer Prize for Criticism was awarded in 1970, and Ron Powers from the *Chicago Sun-Times* received the first award for a *television* critic in 1973.<sup>12</sup> Also, a group of critics formed the Television Critics Association [TCA] in 1977, driven in part by a desire to replace the network-sponsored junkets with a less industry-driven form of interaction between critics and program executives. The new organization limited membership to "professional journalists in the print media who specialize in or whose responsibilities include the regular coverage of

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<sup>11</sup> The critics at the *New York Times* wrote repeatedly about their conflicted thoughts about previewing. Jack Gould, "CBS-TV Plans to Allow Reviews Before Screening," *New York Times*, March 28 1969; John J. O'Connor, "Opening Week of New Season," *New York Times*, September 14 1971. *Variety* also reported in 1973 the statement from an NBC executive explaining the networks' continued refusal to follow the lead of CBS and ABC, who offered pre-review opportunities for critics. M.S. (Bud) Rukeyser, "Why NBC Won't Allow Pre-Reviews," *Variety*, June 6 1973. In 1974, NBC offered a preview for an original movie, and Rukeyser implied his stance towards previews was softening. "NBC Pre-Screens 'Slovik;' Dubelman Bids for Credit," *Variety*, March 13 1974.

<sup>12</sup> Ron Powers' work is not featured in this dissertation. Even in this digital age, access to some historical resources remains challenging, and the *Chicago Sun-Times* is not widely archived. Microfilm of that paper, where Powers worked for much of the 1970s, is not at Georgia State, University of Georgia, or even the Chicago public library system. Powers did not respond to a request for an interview, an appeal made through his literary agent. I did interview two other Pulitzer-Prize winners for TV criticism: Howard Rosenberg and Tom Shales.

television.”<sup>13</sup> A clause in the founding document excluded from membership network-employed publicity executives, an acknowledgement of the organization’s anxiety about the appearance of too close a relationship with the television industry. Critics were aware, then, that while they provided a promotional function for the networks, they did not want to be defined by that association.

The TCA may be read as a sort of critics’ declaration of independence, freeing themselves from the influence of network-sponsored junkets to increase the legitimacy of their work. The TCA provided critics with an organization that hosted twice-yearly press tours featuring industry presentations and previews of the upcoming season of programming. These gatherings shifted the economic burden of supporting critics’ travel from the networks to the individual newspapers that sponsored a critic’s attendance.<sup>14</sup> The TCA’s collective expression of how television critics defined their profession was largely influenced by the enthusiasm and idealism of the young critics who had recently entered the industry. The 1970s, therefore, introduced a renewed attention to defining TV criticism as a profession, and therefore serves as an ideal moment during which to consider the profession.

Just as television may be defined as entertainment, art, commerce, and technology, critics, too, may wear several hats in their responsibilities to their employers. In the narrowest sense, “critic” will be defined here as journalists employed full-time to write about television for print publications in the 1970s. Working the “TV beat,” the critic’s responsibilities included anything writing basic industry news reportage, trend pieces, actor profile features, and

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<sup>13</sup> “TV Reporters Band Together in New Assn,” *Variety*, June 29 1977.

<sup>14</sup> David Bianculli, interviewed for this project, is a founding member of the TCA. I should note that not all critics have attended the TCA through sponsorship—contemporary critic Aaron Barnhart described to me years of sleeping in his car to attend the TCAs early in his career. Also, not all critics felt compelled to join the TCA, including Howard Rosenberg who felt the organization would only lessen his agency as a critic.

individual program reviews. Most distinctively, though, critics were empowered to offer subjective opinions, and this extended beyond their writing as program evaluators. The subjective nature of critical writing not only distinguished critics from journalists, but it also provided a deeper context for their work, with their own biases and priorities clearly elucidated. There is no one definition of the TV critic to account for the variety of approaches to this profession, just as there is no one definition for what is television. Virtually every critic I spoke with considered himself a journalist, yet they also acknowledged the unique nature of the TV beat because they enjoyed freedom to define their writing style, objects of discussion, and the parameters of their responsibilities. In that way, the complexity of studying TV criticism parallels the central challenge of TV scholarship. This, in essence, is the fundamental intervention offered in this project. Scholarly inquiry about TV criticism should approach the critic with the same broad set of questions that we apply to the medium itself.

Because my interest in criticism extends beyond programming to consider television industry and technology, a consideration of the diverse types of writing appearing in print publications is essential for this project. By providing a holistic overview of the types of TV writing that appeared in print publications in the 1970s, I not only offer a more nuanced definition of what qualifies as critical television discourse but also develop a broader critique of TV studies projects that do not identify these important distinctions. Most of the voices represented here were employed under the title of “TV critic,” yet the distinction between critics and non-critics was not simple. For example, the journalists who specialized in reporting television news for *Variety* also wrote program reviews. Some newspapers employed both a critic and a television reporter, so the former could focus on program reviews and trend pieces while the latter could concentrate on news reportage. Both were experts on television, though



they approached their beat differently.

I have included the voices of both types of television specialists, though I pay special attention to note the distinctions between critics and television reporters. Examples of such non-critics whom I will describe as television reporters are Les Brown, who worked at *Variety* and the *New York Times*, Lee Margulies, who worked at the *Los Angeles Times*, and John Carmody, who worked at the *Washington Post*. The fundamental distinction between the two figures—critics and television reporters—was that the latter ascribed more closely to the code of objective journalism.<sup>15</sup> Neither type of commentary is necessarily more valuable but this project distinguishes itself by accounting for the differences among critics in terms of job description, intent, depth of knowledge, personal and professional stakes, and imagined audiences. Less frequently, I have also incorporated the voices of staff reporters, those who wrote about a variety of topics, including occasionally something related to one of my case studies. In these instances, I have marked these individuals as outsiders to TV beat. That these three categories—TV critics, TV reporters, and staff reporters—exist testifies not only to the broader definitional challenges of criticism as profession, but also to the fact that television is a medium that touches so many elements of culture—from entertainment to business to sports to marketing—and print publications required a team of journalists to cover its largesse.

I conducted a series of interviews with critics working during the 1970s or early in the 1980s in order to account for the similarities and differences among TV critics. These interviews included the *Los Angeles Times*' Howard Rosenberg, the *Washington Post*'s Tom Shales, the *St.*

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<sup>15</sup> Morris Janowitz accounts for two ideologically driven models of journalism that influence how reporters do their job. With a focus on the historical development of these models, Janowitz distinguishes between those journalists who view objectivity as their primary goal and those journalists who consider themselves advocates for the public. This distinction does not overlay exactly the distinction between critics and staff reporters, but it does reinforce that a job title often fails to account for the deeper differences in how reporters function. Morris Janowitz, "Professional Models in Journalism: the Gatekeeper and the Advocate," *Journalism Quarterly* 52, no. 4 (1975).

*Louis Post-Dispatch*'s Eric Mink, and two other critics—Noel Holston and David Bianculli—who worked at several newspapers. I also spoke with Lee Margulies, who worked as a television reporter alongside critic Howard Rosenberg at the *Los Angeles Times*. Margulies occasionally wrote television reviews, but he did not self-identify as a critic. Across the interviews, the critics agreed about many professional matters—for example, they all insisted upon their autonomy in the face of industry pressure. Yet, there were enough variances that I have approached this study as an examination of multiplicity, difference, and at times, tension. The majority of critics I spoke with were second generation, so the personal reflections offered here derived from critics who grew up with television, not from the first-generation critics who pioneered the field.<sup>16</sup>

In these interviews, I talked with critics better to understand how they conceived of their role and their writing, how they defined their beat and their audience, and what they hoped was their legacy. One key question I asked every critic, “Do you consider yourself a journalist,” helped me navigate the tricky definitional challenges of this project. Indeed, *every* critic defined himself as a journalist, yet each also oriented his relationship to the values and practices of journalism differently. The TV beat was distinctive to them because a TV critic must become somewhat expert on everything from entertainment to news to history to film to children's television to advertising. The most valuable contribution these critics made to this project was a deeper portrait of the true complexity of their work.

Without a requirement for particular training, the critic's expertise derived more from his/her official sanctioning by a publication than from research, education, or experience. In their professional role, critics operated at the intersection of several industries, including print journalism, television production, and network promotions, marketing, and distribution.

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<sup>16</sup> One challenge of this historical work is that many of the critics discussed here, including John J. O'Connor, Clarence Petersen, and Cecil Smith, have passed away. Shales reported that Laurent is living in an assisted living center.

Employed by print publications, critics served the commercial needs of their employers to reach a wide audience and to satisfy advertiser interests.<sup>17</sup> They also provided a promotional service for the television industry, increasing awareness of programming and drawing attention to particular networks. To encourage the critic's promotional role, network publicity departments often sent critics marketing materials, gifts, and opportunities to view programming in advance; the critic therefore was at once dependent on the TV industry about which they reported while also serving the needs of their print employers.<sup>18</sup> Yet they also wrote for an audience of readers who sought an "expert" opinion. Each critic negotiated this ethical terrain differently.

Importantly, the critic was not a neutral cultural arbiter.<sup>19</sup> Because the critic played different roles, as program evaluator, as industry reporter, and even, at times, as gadfly, s/he may have experienced resistance from the industry or negative reactions to particular pieces. Moreover, critical discourse did not feature unanimous or univocal opinions. As Howard Rosenberg explained, a fundamental requirement of the job of the critic was feeling comfortable delivering a personal perspective: "You have your opinion and that's it. And it is [about]

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<sup>17</sup> This project does not account for critics employed by weekly magazines beyond the industry trade publications *Variety* and *Broadcasting*. Critics working for magazines not only wrote without a byline but they also tended to discuss broad trends more than individual programs due to their weekly publication schedule. Their work, therefore, demanded a unique accounting for the differences of their professional responsibilities, and space did not allow me to provide that sort of accounting.

<sup>18</sup> How critics responded to gifts sent by the industry depended on the critic. Noel Holston of the *Minneapolis Star*, among other publications, insisted that he sent back any large gifts, citing a winter parka as an example of a "large" gift. In terms of preview copies of programs, critics accessed these in a variety of ways. Some critics, like Eric Mink at the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, watched advance copies at the local network affiliate station. Other critics, like Howard Rosenberg, were able to watch programs at their newspaper's office through special video players compatible with the format file sent by the networks.

<sup>19</sup> That cultural meaning develops through conflict is a common theme within cultural studies. For more, see also David Morley, *The Nationwide Audience: Structure and Decoding* (London: BFI, 1980); John Fiske, "British Cultural Studies and Television," in *What is Cultural Studies? A Reader.*, ed. John Storey (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1996); Brian Winston, *Misunderstanding Media* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986); James W. Carey, *Communication as Culture: Essays on Media and Society* (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1989).

subjectivity.”<sup>20</sup> Critics therefore were uniquely empowered to express opinions about television programs, industry operations, and broader television transformations, and many did so largely based more on the strength of their opinion, elegance of their writing and the status of their employer than on their education or personal knowledge of TV practices.

The critic also policed, to some extent, the boundaries of good taste. A few critics with whom I spoke described their work explicitly as “uplift.” For example, Noel Holston noted that his view of television’s capacity for good work derived from his childhood watching programs like *Studio One* with his parents. Holston, having been exposed to the golden age of live theatrical television programming, “knew that TV could be more challenging... I was lobbying in a way for television to reclaim that mantle of serious, thought-provoking drama, as well as live stuff.”<sup>21</sup> Holston spoke here in abstract terms—he did not identify particular industry forces, like producers or network executives, contributing to the elevation or denigration of the medium. Yet his sense that the role of the critic was to identify the best of what television has been and could be again infused all of his writing with an evangelical enthusiasm. The significance of taste, however, extends beyond a critic’s desire to improve the medium.

In his writing about fandom, John Fiske expands Pierre Bourdieu’s conceptualization of the different economic and cultural capital possessed by the dominant and proletariat classes, or between producers and fans.<sup>22</sup> Towards the conclusion of the essay, Fiske describes how fan desire to participate in the production and circulation of popular texts may conflict with the cultural industries’ efforts to erect barriers between the fan and the work. These barriers may be physical (a fence dividing the audience from live performers) or intellectual (as when the ad

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<sup>20</sup> Howard Rosenberg, *Personal Interview* (Los Angeles 2012).

<sup>21</sup> Noel Holston, *Personal Interview* (Athens, GA 2010).

<sup>22</sup> John Fiske, “The Cultural Economy of Fandom,” in *The Adoring Audience: Fan Culture and Popular Media*, ed. Lisa A. Lewis (New York: Routledge, 1992).

campaign conveys a particular reading of the media object).<sup>23</sup> The journalistic critic, too, functions as a barrier, positioned between the industry and the viewer, with a privileged position as the first evaluator, hence an influential voice of interpretation. Beyond the critic's industrial position, however, the critic's education, cultural priorities, and cultural capital are all factors that may divide the critic from the audience. This is particularly important as the critic's reception is a trace archived in a way ephemeral audience reception is not. Moreover, the critic may attempt to evaluate programming as a non-culturally embedded figure, denying his or her own status and distinction from the audience. An individual critic's success at this effort is inherently fraught. For example, Howard Rosenberg pursued objectivity as a critic, which meant, "I tried to separate me from what I'm writing about...I rarely in a critical piece every use[d] 'I' because it comes between you and the piece...I try to draw attention away from the writer." Rosenberg's intentions were admirable, but they also potentially occluded his privilege. For a variety of reasons, Rosenberg was an unusual television viewer—his education, journalistic experience, position at a newspaper, life of intellectual exploration, and the implicit power he embodied through his column all distinguished him from his audience and rendered his relationship with them problematic.

Attention to the critic's cultural power remains essential for any analysis of the critic, acknowledging the ways their own power circulates, constraining the possibilities for the interpretative work of consuming media texts. By considering the critic abstractly as a figure, this dissertation complicates the critic's relationship not only with the industry but also with the audience of newspaper readers and television viewers to whom they seemingly addressed their work. I analyze the critic's identity as "audience," attempting to position the critic in relation to an audience of readers and the wider mass audience targeted by television. Most prominently,

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 41.

identify the critic's "class" position through privilege—in terms of access and in terms of the critic's distribution outlet—to distinguish the critic from the audience to whom s/he writes.

Emphasize the various ways critical writing exposed a fissure between the critic and the audience, I examine the stakes of this relationship and the critic's broader role in the construction of televisual meaning as a site of privileged reception.

Within my study, another work by Bourdieu provides the conceptualization of the cultural intermediary, a formulation that is productive both for its attention to the stakes of the project of aesthetic legitimation and for its depiction of the critic as mediator.<sup>24</sup> The "new cultural intermediary" includes the print publication critics "[who] have invented a whole series of genres half-way between legitimate culture and mass production."<sup>25</sup> Critics produce new texts, forms of distinction, and appropriations of dominant, legitimated culture to negotiate their half-way position between industry and audience.<sup>26</sup> The critic therefore performs an enunciative production, since his/her work theoretically addresses a community of likeminded readers yet lacks an immediate engagement in two-way conversation. Bourdieu's definition of the cultural intermediary attests to the negotiations performed by the critic, performing "partial revolutions in the hierarchies," and falling victim to allodoxia, or misapprehension. The critic's own

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<sup>24</sup> It is important to note that David Hesmondhalgh avoids the term "cultural intermediary" because he argues it has been misinterpreted, defined too broadly. Instead, he employs the term "creative managers," defining those in this role as positioned between executives and producers. But "creative manager" does not account for the connection between the critic and the audience, so it is less useful here. David Hesmondhalgh, *The Cultural Industries* (London: Thousand Oaks, 2002).

<sup>25</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984). 326.

<sup>26</sup> Max Dawson, "Home Video and the 'TV Problem': Cultural Critics and Technological Change," *Technology and Culture* 48, no. 3 (2007). Recently, media scholar and cultural historian Max Dawson has considered the role of the critic in shaping technological meaning in his discussion of the early home video market. He, too, framed the critic as a Bourdieuan cultural intermediary, operating between the manufacturers of home video technologies and the potential consumers among avid television viewers. He also identified the personal stakes of critics hoping to see improvements in television programming, and in this way, Dawson's piece concentrates closely upon the critic's relationship with industry, not an audience of readers.

misapprehension frequently extends beyond programming to a misrecognition of his or her audience. Even while the critic's role as evaluator acts as a sort of cover for the upwardly mobile aesthetic pretensions of the petit bourgeoisie, who "have no need to be alarmed: they can recognize the 'guarantees of quality' offered by their moderately revolutionary taste-makers," their guarantees of quality are nevertheless contested terrain, often made most visible by the critic's anxiety about the status of television and its mass audience.<sup>27</sup> The central questions of media industry studies, an approach that combines a series of methodological frameworks in one comprehensive examination of the production, distribution, exhibition, and reception of media texts, will provide the means to analyze the critic in his relation to his employer, the television industry, and the audience.<sup>28</sup> Within each chapter of this project, I will account for power dynamics, industrial imperatives and struggles over cultural meaning through a media industries perspective.

## 1.2 *TV Criticism as a (Historical) Source*

This dissertation argues that the 1970s were in fact a time of great expansion and increased significance for television critics. During this decade, the Watergate scandal provided yet another opportunity for critics to articulate the significance of television and their role as commentators and critics. TV critic Noel Holston described the mood in which critics like him worked in the 1970s:

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<sup>27</sup> Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*: 326.

<sup>28</sup> For more about media industry studies, see also Jennifer Holt and Alisa Perren, eds., *Media Industries: History, Theory & Method* (Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009). I should note that my use of the phrase "television industry" does not imply that the industry is a monolith. In fact, critics enjoyed different relationships with different segments of the industry, from local stations managers to network executives to a PR contact. The term "audience" also does not mean to reference a unified group of viewers, for critics wrote for a variety of audiences.

When I came on the TV beat in the early 70s, we had just had Watergate, and there was a real flowering of criticism and journalism in that period, and there was also I think, born by Bernstein and Woodward, a sense of mission and crusade. You knew that journalists could matter, and so there was a period starting around 1971 or '72 that lasted well into the 1980s where a lot of really, really good people wrote about television and took it seriously, and you know, at least attempted to hold television news responsible for its abuses of journalistic tradition.<sup>29</sup>

Critics during this era articulated a new significance for television beyond its programming—inspired by the work of fellow journalists, they responded to the medium's increased relevance with an expansion of their own field's professional visibility.

The 1970s is a relatively overlooked era of history within TV studies scholarship.<sup>30</sup> This project examines television in the 1970s through the lens of the TV critic, an application of critic as primary source that reveals both gaps in the traditional academic understanding of television history and opens new paths for analysis. Reading history primarily through critical accounts in print publications alters history, a description of the past that is, after all, always partial, always subjective, and always shifting based on available evidence. Critics offer media historians opportunities to understand the past anew, so I let the critics' writing influence my selection of case studies by identifying peak moments of conversation for them. Within each chapter, by

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<sup>29</sup> Holston, *Personal Interview*.

<sup>30</sup> There are a few prominent histories of the 1970s television, including Elana Levine's *Wallowing in Sex* and Jane Feuer, Paul Kerr, and Tise Vahimagi's *MTM: Quality TV*. Levine's book explores the depiction of sex and culture on American television, arguing that even while representations of female sexuality became more visible within programs of that era, these representations continued to reinforce patriarchal notions of gender. Perhaps due to Levine's focus on programs and ideology, she de-emphasizes industry and policy in her book, conflating the ways networks and advertisers shaped content, for example. My own work will therefore draw a fuller portrait of the multiple stakeholders within the following discussions of television programming, policy, and technology. Elana Levine, *Wallowing in Sex: The New Sexual Culture of 1970s American Television* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007).



shifting the focus of traditional historiographies, I highlight those topics or programs that appeared repeatedly in critical discourse but have not earned a prominent position in traditional television histories.<sup>31</sup>

For example, Jane Feuer, Paul Kerr & Tise Vahimagi's *MTM: 'Quality Television'* examined in depth one production company, MTM Enterprises, Inc., and its aesthetic priorities.<sup>32</sup> The authors' tight emphasis on MTM delivers a nuanced portrait of how industry structure shaped programming, and their work has become a touch point for 1970s scholarship for its novel consideration of the production company as brand. Because of the prominence of their book, along with Todd Gitlin's discussion of *Hill Street Blues* in *Inside Prime Time* and Kirsten Marthe Lentz's comparison of quality and relevant TV, TV scholars have come to take for granted MTM as a defining television company for the 1970s.<sup>33</sup> Thus, critical and scholarly discourse has cumulatively come to canonize MTM as the privileged example of 1970s programming.<sup>34</sup> In my reading of critical discourse year by year, however, *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* did not attract an unusual amount of attention from critics. Critics' opinions of MTM evolved over time and intensified after 1980. The collective works of MTM, their obvious value notwithstanding, have obscured the broader range of programs that achieved success in the 1970s. My work complicates scholarly privileging of MTM's achievements. I will examine instead a range of less edgy programs, creating a fuller portrait of programming between the

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<sup>31</sup> Any process of selection requires privileging some texts while obscuring others, yet by concentrating upon relatively understudied programs, I hope to expand the avenues for analysis without suggesting that these case study programs should be canonized or positioned above others unexamined here.

<sup>32</sup> Jane Feuer, Paul Kerr, and Tise Vahimagi, eds., *MTM: 'Quality Television'* (London: BFI, 1984).

<sup>33</sup> Todd Gitlin, *Inside Prime Time* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983); Kirsten Marthe Lentz, "Quality versus Relevance: Feminism, Race, and the Politics of the Sign in 1970s Television," *Camera Obscura* 43, no. 15 (2000).

<sup>34</sup> Throughout the 1970s, Norman Lear generated more attention in print publications than MTM, and his achievements with *Mary Hartman, Mary Hartman* issued a more dramatic challenge to the structure and operations of the industry. Lear sold *Mary Hartman, Mary Hartman* station by station when he could not gain network support, and the program's ratings success proved that network affiliation was not essential for national reach.

trash and quality formulations of Levine and Feuer. Critics are a particularly valuable lens through which to reconsider overshadowed programs because critics necessarily reviewed a variety of shows that ranged from the sublime to the banal. In chapter 2, I assess the middle range of 1970s programming, including case studies of *The Waltons*, *Happy Days*, and *Holocaust*.

From an industrial perspective, the seventies foreshadowed the end of the classic network era, and television critics were at the forefront of the evolving discourses about these changes. The Big Three – ABC, NBC, and CBS – faced new rivals in the form of a maturing public broadcasting system, the ascendancy of independent stations, and the emerging cable television industry. Even among the Big Three, shock waves erupted in 1977 when ABC supplanted CBS as the number one network, removing CBS's crown for the first time in twenty years.<sup>35</sup> Programming trends ranged from the rise of the “relevant” sitcom in the early 1970s to the peak of the Hollywood film craze to the growing popularity of the original TV miniseries.<sup>36</sup> The 1970s therefore featured the last stand of the three broadcast networks, with the gradual erosion of their domination raising questions about how the TV industry operated. Further challenging the status quo, cable and satellite technologies, long in their infancy, were adopted as complimentary distribution strategies, built on a subscription business model. This shift in business model began to be widely diffused in the 1970s. Other new technologies such as the home video recorder, video game console, and two-way cable also hit the media market in the 1970s, extending the

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<sup>35</sup> Bob Knight, “ABC's Record Ratings Win the Season,” *Variety*, April 20 1977.

<sup>36</sup> The “relevant” sitcom was a relatively failed experiment in timely series, addressing such things as the new liberated woman, young professional idealism, and other cultural touchstones of the early 1970s, because many relevant series failed during their first season. In another programming trend, Hollywood movies became a significant type of programming on television in 1961, and it was during the 1970s that *Gone with the Wind* and *The Godfather* earned the highest license fees of any film aired during the twenty-year period of blockbuster television ratings for Hollywood movies. Carol Levine Sussman, “Hit Movies on TV Since '61,” *Variety*, September 21 1977.

ways critics defined television.<sup>37</sup> The regulatory actions of this decade also altered the future path of the industry in fundamental ways. As I discuss in chapter three, it was during the 1970s that the U.S. government shifted from a regulatory to a deregulatory philosophy.<sup>38</sup> My focus on the dying breaths of the Federal Communication Commission's regulatory efforts underscores the long-term implications of this shift, discussed in more detail in Jennifer Holt's *Empire of Entertainment: Media Industries and the Politics of Deregulation, 1980-1996*.<sup>39</sup> Beyond the broad shifts in policy momentum, television also underwent profound technological change in the 1970s.

Spotlighting the years between the idealism of the 1960s and the rise of the neoliberal 1980s, this project identifies the 1970s as a moment of transition for television.<sup>40</sup> Through a consideration of media programming, policy, and technology, this project analyzes multiple case studies of moments of transition. For these reasons, the 1970s serves as a unique decade in television's history, a bridge between the past and future of TV.<sup>41</sup> For both the critics retiring and the critics just entering the industry of criticism, accounting for all these changes in the industry of TV reached a particular urgency during this decade. Critics were on the front lines of this

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<sup>37</sup> David Bianculli commented in our interview that during the early 1980s he thought that reviews of video games would become part of his responsibilities as a TV critic. This did not come to pass during the 1970s, however, with the critics surveyed here writing about video games only rarely.

<sup>38</sup> This shift reached its climax with a policy effort initiated during the 1970s, the passage of the Communications Act of 1996.

<sup>39</sup> Jennifer Holt, *Empires of Entertainment: Media Industries and the Politics of Deregulation, 1980-1996* (Piscataway: Rutgers University Press, 2011).

<sup>40</sup> A number of media histories have focused on the 1950s or the decades prior. See also Erik Barnouw, *Tube of Plenty: The Evolution of American Television* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975); Michele Hilmes, *Hollywood & Broadcasting: From Radio to Cable* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1990); William Boddy, *Fifties Television* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1990); Chris Anderson, *Hollywood TV: The Studio System in the Fifties* (Austin: University of Austin Press, 1994).

<sup>41</sup> I conclude my study in the early 1980s largely for industrial reasons. In the late 1980s, large-scale mergers led to the conglomeration of the television industry under much larger corporate umbrellas. How critics responded to these dramatic shifts in ownership is a worthy topic, but exploring the implications of the new relationships of newspapers, television production companies, networks, and manufacturers within these industrial frameworks requires a book-length study of its own.

change, documenting and commenting upon the impact of programming shifts, policy changes, and technological transformations impacting the transition from the classical network era to the multichannel era.

### *1.3 Critics in Context: Debates and a Cast of Characters*

The following brief history of television criticism is not a comprehensive review of the industrial developments within criticism but rather offers a road map marking the key issues facing television critics as they defined their profession in the 1970s. At an International Radio and Television Society meeting in 1974, for example, Charles Steinberg, a former CBS public information executive who held a Ph.D. in mass media, identified a commonly cited weakness attributed to television critics by their detractors: “As powerful and all-pervasive as television is, it simply is not amenable to aesthetic analysis, as films, plays and books are.”<sup>42</sup> Steinberg strongly rejected this formulation of television, noting that the medium had produced examples of “superior.” From the point of view of the 1970s, critics were developing deeper methods of analysis as the television medium was itself maturing. The achievements of televisual aesthetics became a more frequent topic of conversation within critical discourse as television developed its unique contributions as a medium.

Critics also formulated a broader conceptualization of television during this decade, defining their own purview beyond program evaluations. Two critics issued prominent polemics in the 1960s and 1970s that addressed television criticism’s lack of depth, breadth, and scrutiny. In 1965, syndicated columnist Ernie Kreiling was invited to publish his “Kreiling Thesis” in *The Bulletin of the American Society of Newspaper Editors*. At the beginning of his article, Kreiling

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<sup>42</sup> Steinberg, “The Compleat Television Critic,” 5.

established the stakes for TV criticism, an industry deserving of higher standards: “a legend persists that criticism of television in the daily press is penetrating and persistent. This is an illusion. It stems from the firmly lodged habit of regarding TV program reviewing as criticism. Reviews are a part, but only a small and fading part, of the broad range of television commentary which is required.”<sup>43</sup> Kreiling described a better form of TV criticism that accounted for industry operations and considered the medium’s broader cultural impact. He also envisioned the critic as a figure who inspired the public to demand better programming.

The second major polemic came from Gary Deeb of the *Chicago Tribune*. In a 1973 issue of *Variety*, Deeb published a harsh critique of the work of his fellow critics. Framing his objections to the writing of many critics as “anti-journalistic,” his insults ranged from calling critics “fuzzyheaded boobs” to “outright prostitutes.”<sup>44</sup> His ire was inspired, in part, by the *Washington Post* and *New York Daily News* reporting that NBC has claimed the #1 spot for the 1973 season’s ratings, without accounting for the fact that NBC’s numbers were based on an October 1 start date for the season, instead of the traditional September start. Pointing out this error, Deeb argued that critics performed a watchdog function, investigating and fact checking the information they received from network publicists. Disparaging the soft tone of many critics’ columns, Deeb accused newspaper editors of hiring poor reporters as critics to appease the television industry and to lend the TV column a “frothy, showbiz-y manner.” Deeb identified several types of writing common in criticism that he deemed uncritical, including “news” updates that reprinted press release content, gushing actor profiles, and letters from viewers made up by the critic himself. In simple terms, Deeb wanted TV criticism to be investigative journalism, and he felt many papers preferred the TV column to be gossipy entertainment.

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<sup>43</sup> Ernie Kreiling, "The Kreiling Thesis," *The Bulletin of the American Society of Newspaper Editors* 489(1965).

<sup>44</sup> Gary Deeb, "TV Critics -- The Hack Pack," *Variety*, January 9 1974.

Despite its disparaging tone, his column ended with a hint of hope that the future would bring a more rigorous and nuanced criticism: “Television — as entertainment, as a business, as a social force — isn’t lacking in issues of consequence. What is missing is a solid corps of dedicated, no-nonsense newspaper journalists to write about them.”<sup>45</sup> Deeb’s piece provided an example of an active public conversation among critics about their profession, their responsibilities, and their relationship with the media industries.<sup>46</sup> My own interest in expanding the purview of the critic beyond program reviews therefore is consistent with contemporary conversations among critics at that time, documenting an increased attention within critical writing not only to the improving aesthetics of television but also to its wider cultural significance.

Reading Gary Deeb’s critique of television criticism, an innocent reader may develop a specific portrait of Deeb as a man of integrity, deep commitment, and (presumably) a dedicated critic. What this innocent reader will not glean from his work is a deeper understanding of the context in which Deeb worked.<sup>47</sup> A number of factors may have influenced Deeb’s desire to publicly criticize his peers. First, he had newly arrived at the *Chicago Tribune* after working in relative obscurity in Buffalo, NY. His piece in *Variety* could be read as self-promotion, an introduction by Deeb to his peers of *his* desired reputation as a rebel with a cause. Second, Deeb worked in the Midwest, far from New York and Los Angeles, the major centers of television industry and production. His ambition, therefore, may have motivated Deeb to write the piece as an implicit acknowledgement that he would not be content to work in relative isolation in Chicago. The local Chicago market for TV criticism was also extremely competitive, with three

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 108.

<sup>46</sup> Both Kreiling and Deeb granted the superiority of the work of critics at national publications like the *New York Times* and *Los Angeles Times*, noting that regional critics were more likely to abdicate the responsibilities of their position.

<sup>47</sup> Deeb’s reputation among other critics was not the best—many thought him disingenuous, failing to live up the high image of himself that he depicted in the newspaper.

critics dominating the beat.<sup>48</sup> Their columns were popular, too, standing as the third most widely read of newspaper editorial columns in the early 1970s.<sup>49</sup> Deeb may have been quite conscious that his work would distinguish him among already distinguished peers, particularly his colleague Ron Powers, who had already won his Pulitzer for criticism by the time Deeb arrived in Chicago. Knowing more about Deeb does not alter the content of his *Variety* article, but it does nuance and frame it, allowing the piece to resonate as a collective statement about criticism while also serving as a personal statement about Deeb's own professed brand of activist criticism.

Because this project argues for a more engaged and contextualized consideration of the critic as a historical source, I will provide a brief explanation for why I've chosen the publications featured here, along with a short description of the significant critics who composed the bulk of my research. In part, this "cast of characters" reflects my own role as historian, shaping the narrative I provide here through my interpretive work. Hayden White argues, for instance, that the most objective of scientific approaches to historical study will nevertheless contain an element of art in the construction of narrative: "a historical narrative is thus necessarily a mixture of adequately and inadequately explained events, a congeries [sic] of established and inferred facts, at once a representation that is an interpretation and an interpretation that passes for an explanation of the whole process mirrored in the narrative."<sup>50</sup> I will approach critical discourse at once as individual and collective, filling in the gaps to identify broader moments of consensus. At times, what critics write—and why they write it—will be my

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<sup>48</sup> A *Variety* article about Deeb in 1975 acknowledged the relative isolation of the critics in Chicago: "The power of Deeb, Ron Powers at the *Chicago Sun-Times*, and Norman Mark at the Daily News is little understood outside the Chi market."

<sup>49</sup> "Chicago Tribune Cools Hot Copy Of Free-wheeling TV Critic Deeb," *Variety*, February 19 1975, 47.

<sup>50</sup> Hayden White, *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978). 51.

focus, functioning as markers along the road, documenting moments in time and conceptual framings persistent in journalistic discourses (and beyond). At other times, however, I'll refer to the "voice" of critics as a collective, one set of stakeholders sharing a similar industrial position, engaging in a larger conversation about the meaning of television. Throughout I will attempt to balance the tension between the individual and the profession, while always keeping in focus the broader contributions scholars may gain from the unique perspectives offered by TV critics.

I weighed a variety of factors—including location, audience, and prominence—in selecting the six publications cited in the case studies that follow, including *Broadcasting*, *Variety*, the *New York Times*, *Los Angeles Times*, *Washington Post*, and *Chicago Tribune*. These publications represent a variety of geographic regions across the U.S. The four general newspapers featured the transition from first to second-generation criticism that I described at the beginning of this chapter. Two employed Pulitzer-Prize winning critics. Most could reasonably claim that television executives read their work with some regularity. The critics working at these publications therefore enjoyed a particular eminence among their peers. In chapter four alone, I bring in one other publication to account for the locally-inflected reporting of the Atlanta superstation, WTCG. Other local papers would perhaps add nuance to this study, but the six publications above shared enough in common to allow broader generalizations about the critics working for them.

*Variety* and *Broadcasting* serve as examples of industry trades, publications that addressed an audience of industry figures, regulators and other empowered or aspiring stakeholders within the TV industry. Often the first to report the news, *Variety* had long boasted prominence as the trade of record for a variety of media, but as its scope included film, TV, music, and theatre, its coverage of television could not feature the same depth as the weekly,



*Broadcasting*. These two trade publications also differed in other ways. In fact, their differences were at times so pronounced that it surprised me how often television studies scholars referenced only one trade publication in historical research projects. To better understand the differences I was finding in my research, I spoke with Joe Flint, a journalist with twenty-five years of experience as a television business reporter, who worked at both *Broadcasting* and *Variety*.<sup>51</sup> He distinguished between the two trades in a variety of ways. For example, because *Broadcasting* based its operation in Washington, D.C., it prioritized news about media regulation, including coverage of the FCC, Congress, and the courts. Other differences, like the fact that *Broadcasting* did not attribute authorship of its columns and editorials throughout the 1970s, conveyed the publication's commitment to the appearance of objectivity.<sup>52</sup> As described by Flint, the lack of a byline in *Broadcasting* also at times frustrated the reporters who felt they were unable to express their perspectives through their writing.

This did not mean, however, that *Broadcasting* did not reveal its stakes in the industry—indeed, their editorials often challenged the government's regulation of broadcasting and criticized individual figures in D.C. with candor.<sup>53</sup> At *Variety*, too, bylined writers such as Les Brown, Larry Michie, and Bill Greeley often criticized industrial operations within their reporting, in columns outside of editorials, even proscribing solutions to media debates.<sup>54</sup> Yet

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<sup>51</sup> In-Person Interview: Joe Flint, *Personal Interview* (Los Angeles 2012).

<sup>52</sup> Very rarely an in-depth piece may include a byline at *Broadcasting*, but the publication generally followed a set format for each issue, including such columns as "ClosedCircuit," "Week in Brief," and "Fates and Fortunes." These columns never listed an author.

<sup>53</sup> Horace Newcomb described *Broadcasting* as the unofficial voice of the National Association of Broadcasters, sharing the organization's resentment of the regulatory inequality between the print industry, protected by the freedom of the press, and broadcasting, regulated through the government's oversight of the publicly-owned airwaves.

<sup>54</sup> For example, in his writing about the struggles of the fledgling public television system, Bill Greeley offered a harsh indictment of the tactics of President Nixon's administration: "In fact, there is every indication that the White House is working to gag public TV completely in this election year." Larry Michie wrote about a possible change to the Copyright Revision Act that would have allowed educators to tape radio or television programs without restriction, but in his description of the possible change, he

*Variety*'s reporters nevertheless sought to provide "balance" by quoting a variety of stakeholders, including network executives, program producers, and other industry workers, about the topic at hand. As historical traces, *Variety* and *Broadcasting* are not only different from each other but also reveal themselves as individual stakeholders in the industry about which they write.<sup>55</sup> Historians, therefore, who reference the trades to trace industry news or trends would be well served to familiarize themselves not only with the differences between the trades but also with the professional stakes of the publication's journalists and editors.

In 1973, the *New York Times* enjoyed the stable employment of two critics who between them covered the TV beat for over fifty years. John O'Connor gradually took over the responsibilities of longtime critic Jack Gould; at first, Gould gave up to O'Connor the daily duty of program reviewing, but then he retired fully in 1972.<sup>56</sup> Gould only appears in this dissertation sparingly, but he is among the most respected of the early critics. He approached the beat with the dedication and professionalism of his journalistic background. His approach to criticism included a broad discussion of programs, industry, and technology, and what his columns may have lacked in personality, they made up for in his attention to detail and the breadth of his scope. O'Connor, on the other hand, was less detached, known for his passionate advocacy of public broadcasting, and as I discuss briefly in chapter two, critics of O'Connor's work sometimes accused him of privileging a narrow range of programs, especially those that were

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described it as "potentially disastrous." Larry Michie, "Copyright Almost Became Copywrong," *Variety*, September 29 1976. The opinions of *Variety*'s reporters, therefore, were often quite visible in their articles, and particularly in their clever article titles. I will describe several examples of Brown's opinionated reporting in my discussion of the Prime Time Access Rule in chapter three.

<sup>55</sup> Horace Newcomb explained to me that *Broadcasting* was perceived to be the voice of the NAB, sharing their stakes and presenting a view of the industry news from that organization's perspective.

<sup>56</sup> The fact that Gould first gave up daily program reviews implied how demanding was this aspect of the beat. Howard Rosenberg described being absolutely "beat" by the beat after writing six articles a week in Louisville. He transitioned to the *Los Angeles Times*, hoping to be inspired anew but also hoping to have to write fewer pieces each week. When Ron Powers left his position at the *Chicago Sun-Times*, *Variety* reported that he did so, in part, because of the stress of writing five times a week. "Ron Powers Dropping Chi Sun-Times Column to do Stints for Sunday Sister," *Variety*, January 22 1975.

more “highbrow” and less popular. This criticism likely derived from O’Connor’s explicit concern that the commercial mandate of television dramatically limited the medium’s potential. For example, in a piece where O’Connor tried to answer how he would improve the medium, he answered with pessimism that was impossible to right the direction of “a multimillion-dollar industry [that] has swerved recklessly into what appears to be a dead-end street.”<sup>57</sup> In the second half of the 1970s, O’Connor’s attitude towards television improved, but this, perhaps, was due to the increased legitimacy of rivals to network television, including PBS and cable TV, alternatives that O’Connor found promising.<sup>58</sup>

In 1973, Les Brown, who had reported for *Variety* for many years, joined the *Times* and brought the paper a new depth of industry reporting. Moving from *Variety* to the *New York Times* simplified Brown’s style—his pieces no longer intimated his point of view as clearly as he did at *Variety*.<sup>59</sup> However, as a staff reporter for the *Times*, he reached a much broader audience that included average viewers unlikely to read a specialized publication like *Variety*.<sup>60</sup> Brown was therefore able to educate a new audience about the ways programs were created and disseminated. In an interview with media scholar Hal Himmelstein, O’Connor acknowledged that his affiliation with the *Times* lent his work a redoubled significance, but he humbly credited that significance entirely to the paper’s reputation and not to his own individual authority.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> John J. O’Connor, “To the Critics: How Would You Improve Things?,” *New York Times*, October 10 1971.

<sup>58</sup> As I read O’Connor’s work year by year, I thought of him as really cranky. His mood improved dramatically in the second half of the 1970s.

<sup>59</sup> Several examples of Brown’s opinionated, point-of-view writing in *Variety* follow in the coming chapters.

<sup>60</sup> Brown’s subsequent publication of a book that served as a citizen media activism guide for viewers confirmed his interest in motivating viewers to demand better television. Helping them understand industry operations was a key part of that mission. Les Brown, *Keeping Your Eye on Television* (New York: Pilgrim Press, 1979).

<sup>61</sup> Hal Himmelstein, *On the Small Screen: New Approaches in Television and Video Criticism* (New York: Praeger, 1981). 39. In our interview, Howard Rosenberg expressed a similar sentiment that his

Working for the *New York Times*, the writing of both Brown and O'Connor enjoyed a particular institutional authority due to the paper's national distribution and reputation.

Critics at both the *New York Times* and the *Los Angeles Times* worked at papers based within the centers of media production, providing those journalists with the strongest ties to the industry, or at minimum with the most efficient means of attending industry-sponsored events, including screenings and press conferences. First-generation critic Cecil Smith took full advantage of this proximity. Smith might be seen as the "ultimate insider." In his articles, he often described his visits to studio sets or the offices of executives. He dropped names casually and without apparent boast; his familiarity with the industry seemed a fact of his life.<sup>62</sup> A reading of Smith's work, therefore, provided (the conscious construction of) an insider's access to the behind-the-scenes world of the L.A. production industry. As a result, Smith's work did not feature prominent criticism of industry operations.<sup>63</sup> Understanding Smith's investment in his insider status partially explained what he wrote (many actor profiles and backstage reports) and how he wrote (confidently and positively).

When second-generation critic Howard Rosenberg joined the *Times* in 1978, he and Smith worked together there for four years. They were nevertheless dramatically different critics

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affiliation with the *Los Angeles Times* gave his work an importance that had little to do with any particular value in Rosenberg's work. In-Person Interview: Rosenberg, *Personal Interview*.

<sup>62</sup> Rosenberg respected Smith's gifts as a writer and efficiency as a critic, yet he also viewed Smith's name-dropping as indicative of a desire to be closer to the industry than he actually was. Of course, Rosenberg cultivated his "outsider" status carefully, so his thoughts about Smith also reveal his own values as a critic.

<sup>63</sup> Smith did not avoid industry news, but he would often incorporate such topics into feature pieces, as when he interviewed producer Bill Burrud. The article is largely a feature of Burrud, but Smith also includes Burrud's thoughts on the declining interest in travel programs and the rising interest in programs that featured animals. He demonstrated a similar technique in his profiles of news anchor Walter Cronkite (a story that also mentioned network desire to offer a one-hour evening news program), producer Sheldon Leonard (a piece that also mentioned the stripping of off-network programs), and game show producer Chuck Barris (a piece that also mentioned the increasing use of game shows in the PTAR hour). Cecil Smith, "A Father Figure to TV Viewers," *Los Angeles Times*, May 12 1970; Cecil Smith, "Sheldon Leonard Cancels a Network," *Los Angeles Times*, July 13 1970; Cecil Smith, "No Bonanza Yet for Gamesmanship," *Los Angeles Times*, May 19 1971.

who offered their readers distinctive approaches to television criticism.<sup>64</sup> Rosenberg cultivated a reputation as someone who would hold the feet of the local industry to the fire. He carefully maintained a persona as an industry outsider: refusing to join the TCA, avoiding the Hollywood Radio and TV Society luncheons at which many journalists glad-handed to develop contacts, and rarely attending official industry conventions, like the National Association of Broadcasters meeting.<sup>65</sup> His independence was evident in his columns in their consistent attention to local news and his avoidance of actor profiles so common in Smith's work. Rosenberg's approach was not necessarily "superior" to Smith's, but it did reflect a different set of critical values that drove him. Accounting for these distinctions in a scholarly consideration of criticism provides a fuller portrait of the diversity evident in the field of TV criticism.

With the example of Cecil Smith and Howard Rosenberg, the transition from first- to second-generation critic was not smooth. Although Rosenberg spoke graciously about Smith, his first years at the *Los Angeles Times* seem to have been very difficult. Describing those years, Rosenberg explained:

I was hired because Cecil Smith was having eye problems and felt like he wanted to step down. So I thought I was coming in here and was going to be the critic. But Cecil, for whatever reason when I came in, decided that it wasn't time for him to go. So I think he hung on maybe for a couple of years, and I became the second-string critic. [Rosenberg's voice got quiet] It was fine, that was neither here nor there...<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> As explained by Rosenberg, he was hired to replace a retiring Cecil Smith, but Smith continued working for four more years, despite repeated surgeries to alleviate difficulties with his eyes.

<sup>65</sup> By the end of his time at the *Times*, Rosenberg did not work in the newspaper's office building anymore. Tracking where critics worked would perhaps reveal intriguing shifts in their status or in the relative affluence of the newspaper industry. Rosenberg said Cecil Smith had a huge office—Rosenberg was not offered this office after Smith left.

<sup>66</sup> Rosenberg, *Personal Interview*.

The editor of the TV section was very close with Cecil Smith, and Rosenberg felt she resented him as the interloper. His memories of the years working alongside Smith included some painful memories, as when an editor commented, “you know something, Howard? Cecil loves words. You don’t love words.” Rosenberg admitted, “It was one of the times I have been really hurt deeply, because I do love words.” Rosenberg acknowledged, though, that Smith was a different type of critic, and for Smith, the prose seemed to come really easily, while Rosenberg had to work at it. Rosenberg won a Pulitzer Prize in 1983, gaining a recognition that can be elusive for critics, and it helped him set himself apart from the legacy of Cecil Smith: “By the time of the Pulitzer, I was already a big shot. God, poor guy, when I got a Pulitzer, Cecil probably slit his wrists. We were friendly afterward, too, and I ended up liking him a lot. And I learned a lot from Cecil because I was pushed by him, even though he didn’t know it, to be a better writer.” When Smith retired, Rosenberg expected to get his huge office “upstairs.” When he did not, he started working from home more and more, until he gave up his *Times* office entirely. Howard Rosenberg therefore set his own path as a critic at the *Los Angeles Times*, and as the “upstairs” office anecdote demonstrates, Rosenberg never really replaced Cecil Smith because the two men approached the job so differently.

At the *Chicago Tribune*, Clarence Petersen, a non-fiction reviewer, became the paper’s TV critic in 1969, but he declared in his first column as critic that he would only remain in the position for as long as he remained interested—which ended up being four years. Petersen’s columns demonstrated a remarkable transparency about the business of criticism. For instance, in one piece, he analyzed (and printed a large excerpt from) a press release about the second reboot of a program starring Doris Day, and in another, he described the odd experience of

attending a television junket in Los Angeles as a “game” critics played to generate copy.<sup>67</sup>

Because he was a temporary critic, Petersen did not invest in the professional stakes of his peers and therefore had nothing to lose in writing pieces that exposed the junkets as attempts by networks to buy critics’ loyalty.<sup>68</sup> His work is an anomaly, but a productive one for scholars wanting to understand more about the parameters of the profession of criticism and the implicit negotiations critics were asked to perform each day.

When Petersen stopped writing television reviews in 1973, a critic with a more aggressive style took over his post. Gary Deeb came to Chicago from a TV critic position in Buffalo, and he jumped into his work at the *Chicago Tribune* with a vengeance.<sup>69</sup> Deeb’s writing conveyed a vision of himself as a populist truth teller, as in this example of his reportage about the possible firing of Dan Rather at CBS: “Except for the most innocuous corporate quacking, lips are sealed at virtually all levels of CBS. This column, however, has moved past the network stonewall.”<sup>70</sup> Deeb’s self-constructed persona suggested he would not stop before finding the truth. Deeb also did not fear making enemies, so he was critical not only of network executives but also of actors like *All in the Family*’s Carroll O’Connor, whom he accused of greed after salary negotiations went public.<sup>71</sup> Deeb’s investigative work on local television earned him

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<sup>67</sup> In the first tongue-in-cheek piece, Petersen analyzed the decision to reboot a CBS show starring Doris Day with her character, Doris Martin, as a single lady instead of a mother: “whenever you get such an eloquent press release, you suspect it conceals a sordid story.” In the second piece, details included the beautiful actresses who chatted with critics at parties, and who told him they were paid \$25 to do so. Clarence Petersen, “It’s All a Game--Aboard the Titanic,” *Chicago Tribune*, June 10 1973.

<sup>68</sup> Petersen’s tone was always jolly, not spiteful or bitter. He may have been able to get away with transparent discussions of the industry structures within which critics worked because his tone removed the bite from his critique.

<sup>69</sup> Petersen continued to write reviews of nonfiction for the *Chicago Tribune* for the rest of his life, but he had resigned as a TV critic after announcing he “had run out of gas.” Clarence Petersen, “After 4 years, Our Critic Has Run Out of Gas,” *Chicago Tribune*, September 7 1973.

<sup>70</sup> Gary Deeb, “CBS News is Cleaning House,” *Chicago Tribune*, August 22 1974.

<sup>71</sup> Deeb frequently wrote about television actors threatening to quit during contract disputes. At one time, Carroll O’Connor from *All in the Family* wrote a lengthy rebuttal to Deeb’s accusations, calling him a pretend “insider” and noting that his attacks derived from “the spirit of ornery, old-fashioned meanness.”

acclaim, but it was his brutal distrust of the powerful network executives and industry leaders that earned him infamy. If you read Deeb's work against the industry trades, you can see where he has borrowed explicit phrases and examples, but his ability to make industry news sexy earned him a wide following.<sup>72</sup>

At the *Washington Post* Sander "Sandy" Vanocur, an experienced "hard" newsman, "helicoptered" in, as Rosenberg described it, becoming TV Editor at the *Washington Post* in 1975. Vanocur joined three other television writers at the D.C.-based publication, including Lawrence Laurent, John Carmody, and Tom Shales. During his short two-year tenure with the *Post*, Vanocur was opinionated and unafraid to reveal with candor his personal perspective and priorities in his columns; in particular, he wrote often about media policy and was sharply critical of how government interfered in the business of television, frequently emphasized in his work as a commercial medium that he argued should operate within the free market.<sup>73</sup> For example, Vanocur wrote several articles in opposition to the Family Viewing Hour, an example of industry self-regulation, and he was also sharply critical of Congressional members mumbling about the "sex'n'violence" depicted on television, accusing them of confusing a commercial advertising

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Deeb's response stood by his story. Carroll O'Connor, "Irate Carroll O'Connor Tells TV Critic Deeb He Has It All Wrong," *Chicago Tribune*, December 20 1976; Gary Deeb, "Deeb Sticks by His Stories," *Chicago Tribune*, December 20 1976.

<sup>72</sup> On January 15, *Variety*'s Larry Michie described his concern with the Family Viewing Hour: "Sex and violence in TV programming isn't the problem—it's the *exploitation* of sex and violence to compensate for barren program values." He also intoned, "the king isn't wearing any clothes." Deeb then reported on February 15, "what makes so much of TV programming truly despicable is the *exploitation* of sex and violence in order to grab ratings." Deeb also mentioned a naked emperor, but did not cite *Variety* or Michie. Larry Michie, "TV Dilemma: What is 'Family Hour'?", *Variety*, January 15 1975. Gary Deeb, "'Family Hour' Programming An Elaborate Network Hoax," *Chicago Tribune*, February 3 1975.

<sup>73</sup> For example, in a discussion of the limitations imposed on the growth of pay cable, Vanocur accused the networks of avoiding competition by hiding behind government regulations: "Do the networks wish to continue with the protective government regulations they want and usually get, or are they prepared to compete in a truly free market?" Sander Vanocur, "The Networks vs. the Cable in a (Supposedly) Free Market," *Washington Post*, July 13 1975.



medium with a tool of intellectual and moral uplift.<sup>74</sup> Tom Shales began writing program reviews consistently under Vanocur's tenure, eventually taking over as TV Editor after Vanocur departed to work at ABC News.<sup>75</sup> As Shales came into his own as a TV critic towards the end of the decade, his work became distinguished by the elegance of its prose and by the broad connections he drew between television and the wider American culture. In addition, throughout the 1970s, Lawrence Laurent, a first-generation critic, also worked at the *Post*, predominantly overseeing the weekly TV guide, *Channels*. Another reporter, John Carmody, wrote an industry-focused column for the *Post* during this period as well. According to Shales, Carmody was incredibly well liked—by colleagues and readers alike—and his entertaining style of reporting the television news earned his column an unusual popularity for a straight news column. As these examples illustrate, the *Washington Post* invested heavily in the reportage of television, and also featured a strong emphasis on the interactions between government and television, as befitting a publication centered in D.C. That said, each writer developed an individual style and set of priorities.

Location and employment could influence a critic's content. For example, Tom Shales commented that he joked with Howard Rosenberg that they should have switched venues at some point since Rosenberg was “more of a political animal than I am” and “I was more of a star struck, entertainment guy than him.”<sup>76</sup> Because they were sort of working against the grain of their personal interests, though, Shales wondered if that made each of them better critics. Other factors that shaped critics' approaches to the beat included the advice of their editors. While the critics I spoke with generally enjoyed far-reaching freedom to determine their column topics under their editors, Shales shared one example of how his editor helped him extend his job

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<sup>74</sup> Sander Vanocur, "The Critics in the Congress," *Washington Post*, August 26 1975.

<sup>75</sup> Shales remained the head TV critic at the *Post* until two years ago.

<sup>76</sup> Tom Shales, *Phone Interview* (2012).

description. Working under Style editor Shelby Coffey, a man Shales praised highly, he was encouraged by Coffey to cover presidential appearances on television. This became a part of the job that Shales found rewarding even though he did not originally conceive of covering presidential speeches as part of his beat.

Focusing on the critic as primary source helps identify the confluence of forces that may have shaped their work. From their individual values as a critic to the facets of television excluded from their purview, critical writing may contain unexpected absences and concentrations. The broader impact of critical writing, however, supersedes these individual qualifications to formulate a dense and complex portrait of 1970s television. Throughout this decade, critics were balancing the tension between the television industry as long established and as currently transforming in order to make one unified commentary that television mattered. For a scholar of television, these individual factors and collective contributions illustrate the flexibility of the critical role, and they serve as a reminder that a careful balancing of the individual, the institutional, and the collective contributions of critics produces a deeper, more nuanced portrait of their work and their role in shaping televisual meaning.

#### *1.4 TV Criticism as a Site*

The 1970s marked a professional turning point for both critics and media scholars. Alongside the efforts of critics to professionalize their own field through the establishment of the Television Critics Association, the field of television studies, as a humanistic discipline, was born during this period. Critics and scholars, however, largely operated upon parallel, not intersecting, paths. Scholars Horace Newcomb, Lynn Spigel and Derek Kompare have all

depicted the seventies as marking the emergence of a new, qualitative study of television.<sup>77</sup> In his overview of the emerging humanistic study of television, Horace Newcomb drew a distinction between the works of television critics and scholars.<sup>78</sup> For a variety of reasons, he explained that critics must take shortcuts by appealing to pre-conceived categories of television. These shortcuts often prevented them from more academic forms of analysis: “as with all journalistic criticism of television, there was little sense of consistency, of systematic orientation toward the medium that could make for firm understanding.”<sup>79</sup> Newcomb highlighted here the primary challenge that faces a scholar analyzing historical critical discourse as a site: criticism was diverse, vast, and featured a very specific type of writing about television, shaped by space limitations, deadline pressures, and an overwhelming amount of material to cover. Newcomb’s attention to critics drew distinctions between their work and scholars, but it also established a mutual set of interests. The 1970s, therefore, serves a particularly resonant moment through which to analyze the parallels and divergences between critical and scholarly writing, to better identify how scholars and critics may work together to understand and critique TV.

To examine the critic as a site for television studies research, this dissertation models a productive consideration of the tension, disjuncture, and conflict evident in the diversity of critical discourse. In particular, I will examine the ways critical discourse differs from scholarly practices because the most interesting historical discoveries often arise from those moments

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<sup>77</sup> Kompare frames his *Rerun Nation* through the lens of the rerun, so his discussion of the rise of the academic study of television aligns with the television’s function as an archive for historic programs, a link to the past otherwise invisible. Derek Kompare, *Rerun Nation: How Repeats Invented American Television* (New York: Routledge, 2005). See also Richard Stonesifer’s discussion of how he, an English professor, developed a course about television and culture in 1967. Richard J. Stonesifer, “A New Style for Criticism,” *Television Quarterly* 6, no. 2 (1967).

<sup>78</sup> Newcomb also praises the work of several television critics in his piece and indeed wrote his own brand of criticism for a Baltimore print publication during a brief period of his life.

<sup>79</sup> Horace Newcomb, “American Television Criticism, 1970-1985,” *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 3(1986): 219-20.

where critical and scholarly knowledge do not align yet operate in close proximity. Lynn Spigel has argued that the critical impulse of the 1960s, embodied in journalistic criticism, shifted to the academic realm in the 1970s. In her reading of the past, therefore, Spigel observed a “transformation from journalist to scholar,” as criticism lost its prominence when academics began to develop qualitative studies of scholarly studies of television.<sup>80</sup> I disagree with Spigel’s central conceit that journalistic television criticism suffers in comparison to academic work, particularly as one must account for the differences in scope, scale, and industrial contexts between critical and scholarly work. Yet I nevertheless would like to offer a reading of the quote above that suggests Spigel’s argument may indeed confirm that among the community of television scholars, journalistic criticism lacked relevance to their work. This project therefore approaches the critic as a site to highlight the value of journalistic criticism for television studies scholarship when scholars take into account the unique industrial position of the critic.

Other scholars of the 1970s, in addition to Newcomb, contemplated the role critics could play in advancing the medium. Yet a tension is visible between the scholars who wanted to apply an aesthetic perspective to television—to herald quality and encourage uplift—and those who aspired to a criticism that accounted for television as more than an entertainment medium. In an analysis of four contemporary critics, Saul Scher, a professor at a university in Maine, issued in 1974 a call for journalistic critics to undertake a more diverse and far-reaching appreciation of television, suggesting that the workings of the FCC were as important a subject for critical analysis as individual programs.<sup>81</sup> Scher saw potential for a deeper television criticism, where the TV critic took on a large role in advancing a portrait of the medium’s industrial and cultural

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<sup>80</sup> Lynn Spigel, "The Making of a TV Literate Elite," in *The Television Studies Book*, ed. Christine Geraghty and David Lusted (London: Arnold, 1998).

<sup>81</sup> Saul N. Scher, "The Role of the Television Critic: Four Approaches," *Communication Quarterly* 22, no. 3 (1974).

significance beyond its operation as an entertainment medium. Also in 1974, the aforementioned Charles Steinberg published an article that purported to describe the “compleat” critic. He first exposed some common critiques of television and the criticism of it, including pervasive assumptions of television’s lack of “seriousness” and “other impediments to a television aesthetic.”<sup>82</sup> Hoping for a more “influential” television criticism, Steinberg urged critics “to take television criticism as seriously as they take the coverage of politics” and to advocate for television to develop an “‘aesthetic’ indigenous to television.”<sup>83</sup> These scholars looked to critics for an echo of their own work, but the fact that they saw value in a more robust criticism established a relation between academics and journalistic critics.

Scholar David Littlejohn was more dismissive of the possibilities for journalistic criticism in his contribution to *Television as a Cultural Force*, arguing that TV programs deserved more filmic and literary style analyses. Littlejohn wrote, “millions of Americans dote on their ‘own’ daily TV reviewers, for all their dismal prose and timid taste, as they never could with critics of a wiser, keener stamp.”<sup>84</sup> Despite an acknowledgment of the constraints imposed on journalistic critics, including tight deadlines and a constant demand for content, Littlejohn advocated a more insightful style of criticism, where the critic educated the audience, identified distortions in news, and envisioned new possibilities for television. The Journalism Resources Institute at Rutgers University was also interested to increase the scope and significance of television in the 1970s. The institute hosted a three-day seminar led by critics Les Brown and Ron Powers and by scholars Horace Newcomb of the University of Texas at Austin, Rutgers University’s Richard Heffner and Jerome Aumante, who wrote up a description of the seminar

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<sup>82</sup> Steinberg, “The Compleat Television Critic,” 5.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, 7, 10.

<sup>84</sup> David Littlejohn, “Thoughts on Television Criticism,” in *Television as a Cultural Force*, ed. Richard Adler and Douglass Cater (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1976), 165.

for *Television Quarterly*. Among concerns about journalistic criticism identified was the high turnover rate, the desire of newspapers to attract rather than inform readers, and the overwhelming workload. Powers insisted that readers would be interested to read more about the television industry, and Newcomb hoped academic criticism of television would serve as “help” for critics.<sup>85</sup> These are all examples of a growing interest in journalistic television criticism in the 1970s by scholars creating their own approaches to the study of television.

Accounting for the critic as a site of analysis is not easy as the following short review of academic work focused on the critic demonstrates. Not only is it difficult for scholars to issue satisfying broad conclusions about a varied set of writers and reporters, but also because critics address so many topics—from entertainment to news to policy to advertising—the methodological challenge of accurately reflecting this range is forbidding. A number of M.A. theses and dissertations that have shared my focus on the critic often feature a quantitative methodology based on content analysis. Strongly influenced by the social scientific roots of TV studies, these projects sought to establish the parameters of (exceptional) TV criticism.<sup>86</sup> Such quantitatively oriented studies of the critic have highlighted the critic’s pedagogical role, instructing audiences about what qualifies as quality or otherwise establishing standards meant to uplift a medium known for its appeal to the lowest common denominator.<sup>87</sup> In this study,

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<sup>85</sup> Jerome Aumente, "A New Look at Television Critics," *Television Quarterly* 17, no. 1 (1980).

<sup>86</sup> Frakes, "A Study of Standards Imposed by Four Leading Television Critics with Respect to Live Television Drama."; Karen E. Kline, "The Newspaper Television Critic as Journalist: An Examination of Content and Function in a Selected Sample of Television Criticism" (Master's Thesis, Temple University, 1981); Candace Chisholm Justice, "A Study of the Factors Influencing Television Critics' Selection of Column Topics" (Master of Arts Thesis, Memphis State University, 1992); Paul L. Del Colle, "'The Eye of the Beholder': The Social and Cultural Significance of Television as Reflected in the Work of Television Reporters and Critics for Selected U.S. Newspapers, 1976-1986" (Doctoral Dissertation, New York University, 1990).

<sup>87</sup> Julian Carr Jr. Burroughs, "The Effectiveness of Television Criticism in Influencing Viewers' Judgements of Programs in an Educational Television Series" (Doctoral Dissertation, University of Michigan, 1960); Peter Edmond Mayeux, "The Functions of Five Television Critics: Theory vs. Practice" (Master's Thesis, University of Iowa, 1967); Jules Rossman, "What Do Reviewers Actually Review,"

alternatively, I will examine the ways critics deliver hybrid forms of writing that resonate on multiple levels at once. The critic, as I demonstrate, embodies several roles, including program reviewer, news reporter, commentator, and program guide preparer. Rather than present this dissertation as the final word on the parameters of what constitutes television criticism, I will instead embrace the ambiguity and complexity of the critic's purview.

One prominent example of a qualitative study of varied types of television criticism is Hal Himmelstein's *On the Small Screen: New Approaches in Television and Video Criticism*. Through a broad literature review of media theories applied by scholars to television, from Dwight MacDonald's mass culture as parasite theory to John Cashill's TV as mythology theory, Himmelstein studies the work of critics to understand television as art.<sup>88</sup> Having conducted interviews with critics ranging from the *New York Times*' John J. O'Connor to TV scholar-critic Horace Newcomb, whom he calls the "guru of the academic critics," Himmelstein provides a close analysis of their work in terms of how it accounts for the art of television. Himmelstein's goal is rather specific—he wants to counter a condemnation of television as a mass medium by defining the strategies employed by critics to identify the growing sophistication of television. His work, therefore, features a rehabilitative agenda, but Himmelstein seems unsure of which tools to employ for his qualitative analysis. Examining a diverse set of approaches to television

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*Journal of Broadcasting* 9(1964-1965). Attempts at qualitative studies of the critic, on the other hand, have struggled to identify a productive methodology to consider not only the value of critical writing but also its larger role contributing to televisual meaning. For example, in her Master's thesis in 1981, Adina Cheree Carlson noted, "the creative content of any critic's work cannot be reduced to numbers and categories without the danger of losing the meaning behind the word." Carlson correctly noted the absence of a qualitative examination of critical writing, but because the method she applied—a rhetorical analysis based on the philosophical works of Edmund Husserl—did not derive from the work of the critics themselves, it offered limited applicability for future studies. Adina Cheree Carlson, "A Study of Contemporary Television Critics" (Master's Thesis, Colorado State University, 1981).

<sup>88</sup> Himmelstein, *On the Small Screen: New Approaches in Television and Video Criticism*: 1-16.

as art, Himmelstein fails to model a comprehensive and versatile method that recurs throughout each chapter.

Jonathan Gray discusses critical discourse as a paratext in *Show Sold Separately*, examining how reviews of *Friday Night Lights* established the parameters through which audiences approached the program.<sup>89</sup> Gray analyzes critical discourse as constitutive, able to shape meaning in the ways critics do and do not describe a program's appeal. As such, Gray considers the critic within the typical parameters of their work as program evaluators.<sup>90</sup> My own study of the critic goes further, identifying critical discourse as a primary source in its own right. The critic is a source of information about programs, industry, policy, and technology; in their efforts to account for television in its multiplicity, therefore, critical discourse shares particular preoccupations with TV scholarship, including television's low cultural status, its commercial mandate, and its aesthetic ambitions.

In her own short history of television criticism, Amanda Lotz notes that while scholars have frequently analyzed critical writing in terms of content, they have rarely positioned the critic within the circuit of cultural production. She employs Joseph Turow's concept of the media "facilitator" to describe the critic's industrial position as a figure who evaluates television content.<sup>91</sup> Lotz's adoption of "facilitator" assumes a positive orientation of forward momentum, with a facilitator enabling the production/creation of something. I have preferenced instead

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<sup>89</sup> Jonathan Gray, *Show Sold Separately: Promos, Spoilers and Other Media Paratexts* (New York: New York University Press, 2010).

<sup>90</sup> Jason Mittell has also written about television critics, but his interests are targeted narrowly towards the broad shifts in critical practices after critics adopted web-based platforms. Jason Mittell to FlowTV, 2005; Jason Mittell to JustTV, 2010.

<sup>91</sup> Lotz acknowledges Bourdieu's conceptualization of the cultural intermediary in a footnote, but she does not provide many details about why she prefers Turow's "facilitator" to Bourdieu's intermediary beyond a suggestion that Bourdieu's term fails to account for the "competence" and cultural politics of critics. Amanda D. Lotz, "On 'Television Criticism': The Pursuit of the Critical Examination of a Popular Art," *Popular Communication* 6(2008).



Bourdieu's concept of the "intermediary," because it conveys a multi-directional stance, allowing for the efforts of critics to flow in multiple directions—advancing the aims of industry or challenging them. I prefer the ambiguity of Bourdieu's cultural intermediary—the constant negotiation of the middle ground without the necessity to deliver the end product of a "facilitator." As a cultural intermediary, the critic negotiates tensions produced by his/her interaction with multiple audiences, including a variety of stakeholders within the television industry.

Another difference between my work and Lotz's is our historical periodization. I reference a generational shift—spotlighting the transition from the first- to the second-generation during the 1970s—while Lotz employs a more complex three-part periodization. She positions the second generation between the critic's adoption of the preview function in the late 1960s and the formation of the TCA in the late 1970s. Lotz and I therefore coalesce around the same historical moments yet nevertheless assess the impact of these events differently. My focus on the generational transformation evokes a more gradual process, a changing of the guard rather than a teleological process of evolution. The TCA, while significant in terms of how critics presented themselves to the industry, did not impact every critic similarly. Neither Howard Rosenberg nor Tom Shales, for example, joined the TCA and they rarely attended the press tour. For Rosenberg, the TCA was unnecessary because he lived in Los Angeles and therefore did not require the TCA's facilitation of an encounter with executives. For Shales, he freely admitted that his view of the TCA may be a bit "snotty" but he nevertheless described their efforts to transform the press tour as "intimidation" of the industry. My view of the shifts in critical focus and attention, therefore, attempts to account for the uneven and unpredictable ways critics

responded to shifts in television production, critical practices and values, and programming trends.

### 1.5 Chapter Descriptions

The three chapters within this dissertation each feature one focal area of critical discourse—from program evaluation to media policy analysis to televisual technology—to account for the variety of ways critics represent television and comment upon its broader cultural significance. I begin with program evaluation because it is the most prominent role of the critic. The programs discussed in chapter two spanned the decade and therefore also serve as a historical overview of the networks and programming trends of the 1970s. Chapter three builds upon the industrial foundation established by chapter two, delving deeper into a discussion of programming trends through a case study of the Prime Time Access Rule. The final case study then closes out the decade by examining the satellite-distributed superstation, a technology that threatened to destabilize the television operations featured in chapters two and three.

Chapter two presents three case studies of critical evaluation to understand the stakes involved in any act of television evaluation.<sup>92</sup> The programs are *The Waltons*, a family drama that premiered on CBS in 1972; *Happy Days*, a sitcom that premiered on ABC in 1974; and *Holocaust*, a miniseries that premiered on NBC in 1978. My argument in chapter two has three key goals. First, I move beyond the quality discourse to examine instead how each program featured here ascribes to a particular authenticity upon which critics often based their assessment. Second, this chapter develops an explicit critique of the language of evaluation by identifying the

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<sup>92</sup> Public broadcasting came into its own during this decade also, but due to space restrictions, the unique industrial structure of PBS, and my focus on popular programs, I have not included a case study of a PBS here.

ways critics reinforced television's inferiority through a condemnation of its audience. Because I focus on three programs that achieved high ratings, the critics I study frequently attempted to account for why these programs resonated with viewers. The tensions implicit within critical acts of distinction became apparent in the case studies offered here because of the divide between how critics viewed each program and how the mass audience responded. For example, critics largely celebrated the growing ratings for *The Waltons* as a sign of the audience's ability to distinguish quality, while the popularity of *Happy Days* exposed the mass audience as incapable of recognizing the program's relative emptiness. Both reactions to the "audience" are problematic for reasons I will discuss further in chapter two. Nevertheless, critics did not always agree in their program assessments, and their reactions towards particular shows sometimes changed over time. These divergences—between different critics and sometimes between a critic's own evolving considerations of a program's value—reveal a deeper complexity to the process of critical evaluation.

Third, I offer a critique of the ways scholars have incorporated critical voices into television studies of programming and artistry. Too often, scholars have cited a critic as support for their own readings of a particular program. Such usage implies that the citation is representative of a broader reception of programming. More troubling than this, though, is that often scholars fail to account for popular programs according to their own terms.<sup>93</sup> The mere fact of popularity demands some analysis.<sup>94</sup> In this chapter, therefore, I explore the extent to which

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<sup>93</sup> I have consciously avoided entering into the "quality" discourse that has come to define particular programs prominent in the 1970s, from *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* to *All in the Family*. While I do not employ the term "middlebrow" because of its complicated history and specific class associations, the term "popular" stands in because of its simpler reference to a program's wide appeal, regardless of class status.

<sup>94</sup> In this way I am picking up on the original call of the field of cultural studies to account for programs enjoyed by the masses, yet a significant distinction between the efforts of scholars like Pierre Bourdieu and E.P. Thompson is that I do not focus much attention on class. Certainly, class operates as an undercurrent in discussions of the mass audience (and I will reference class when critics contemplate it),

critics challenged or reinforced the relative value of television through its most prominent meaning-making narratives: ratings data, the mass audience, and evaluative discourses that circulated around *The Waltons*, *Happy Days*, and *Holocaust*.

Chapter 3 reconsiders a prominent example of 1970s national media policy through the perspective of the television critic. This case study follows critical commentary about the Prime Time Access Rule [PTAR], introduced by the Federal Communication Commission in the early 1970s to boost diversity in television production and programming. The PTAR (and the accompanying rules that came to be known as the Financial Interest and Syndication Rules) limited network control over program production and distribution by returning control over six weekly hours of primetime programming to local stations. While the PTAR is largely considered a policy failure, my analysis of critical discourse exposes how this “failure” narrative originated even before the rule took effect and also how the failure narrative discounted a number of PTAR programming successes documented by critics.

The final case study in chapter four investigates how critics accounted for one example of new technology at the end of the 1970s. Through an examination of the Atlanta-based satellite superstation WTCG, I will contrast the different ways staff reporters and critics described WTCG’s emergence to illustrate how critics qualified the more utopian and enthusiastic projections of transformative change promulgated by reporters and industry figures.<sup>95</sup> More broadly, I account for the constitutive role of discourse in shaping (and limiting) the use of technology. Despite the potential revolution offered by its complete disruption of the distribution structures upon which broadcasting had depended since the earliest days of radio networking,

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but my interest here is more on how critics position themselves in relation to programs that have succeeded on the commercial terms established by television ratings.

<sup>95</sup> As I explain in chapter 4, I will consistently refer to the Atlanta superstation as WTCG, its name when first distributed by satellite.

incumbent media businesses gradually incorporated the satellite into established media practices. This is an old story in media studies—how new technologies lose their disruptive potential through assimilation. What has not often been considered in this story is how critics have served as some of the earliest voices acknowledging this co-option of new technologies—in this case, the satellite’s incorporation into the emerging cable television industry. Through case studies of program evaluation, media policy, and technology, this dissertation reflects the breadth and depth of the critic’s purview.

## 2 THE CRITIC'S PURVIEW: PROGRAM EVALUATION AND THE POPULAR

"It's possible that the "great big middle" of regular, prime-time, weekly series is doomed to general mediocrity." –John J. O'Connor, *New York Times*<sup>1</sup>

As part of their professional responsibilities, TV critics are uniquely empowered to issue value judgments about TV programs. They have therefore engaged in a similar set of questions and practices as TV scholars. More than simply serving as convenient sources, they are themselves contributors to conversations about television's value and meaning. And their work, like that of scholars, tended to privilege particular texts. What critics wrote, for whom, why, and what types of impact they sought from their work are all issues that deserve deeper scholarly analysis. Yet these are the very issues that scholars often overlook when they incorporate critical work into their publications. Moreover, critical discourse offers a unique—and often unexploited—resource for scholars wanting to understand better not only how critics evaluate programs but also what may be the deeper implications of their evaluation. This chapter, therefore, provides three case studies of critical evaluation in order to identify the criteria by which critics judge programs, the audience(s) to whom they see themselves offering these evaluations, and the wider cultural and industrial stakes that drive their acts of evaluation.

This chapter applies three lenses through which to view critical evaluation: as a profession, source, and site. Among their most visible and acknowledged professional tasks, critics offered an interpretation of the relative success of new and continuing series.<sup>2</sup> As the case

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<sup>1</sup> John J. O'Connor, "Just Too Many Cops and Robbers," *New York Times*, November 4 1973.

<sup>2</sup> The majority of critical reviews feature new programs, but when provided with a reason to revisit an older series—a cast change or prominent storyline, for example—critics would revisit a series in progress.

studies below document, critics sometimes disagreed about the strengths of an individual series, yet the broader patterns and similarities within critical discourse often defined the terms through which programs were appraised by other critics, by television executives, and by viewers.

Common themes that circulate through this chapter include how critics defined authenticity as a programming value, and how they interpreted the ratings success of a program. In particular, this chapter identifies moments of divergence and convergence between critical reviews and audience reception as measured by ratings data. Critics enjoyed the privilege of offering an early reaction to programs through the increasing use of the preview, yet they enjoyed little control over audience viewing patterns beyond the expression of their opinion. How critics understood and reported the meaning of a program's ratings success, therefore, will highlight the contradictions operational in the critic-audience relationship, contradictions that at once narrowed the critic's influence and also marginalized the role of the audience in advocating for better programming.

Just as critics have been understudied in television scholarship, so, too, has scholarship failed to account for the wide range of entertainment programs that exist in between "quality" and "trash." The most prominent work on 1970s "quality" programming is Jane Feuer, Paul Kerr, and Tise Vahimagi's *MTM: Quality Television*, published in 1984.<sup>3</sup> Feuer et al defined quality television as dependent on audience demographics and an auteurist notion of a corporate

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For example, when the actor portraying John-Boy Walton departed the series *The Waltons*, many critics reviewed his swan song episode in season five.

<sup>3</sup> Feuer, Jane, Paul Kerr, and Tise Vahimagi, eds. *MTM: Quality Television* (London: BFI, 1984). This work has become so significant within TV studies that many scholars think of *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* first, providing it with a primacy not reflected in critical discourse. While critics enjoyed the program, they also discussed it rarely. From the perspective of daily journalistic writing, *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* was only one program among many, many others. It was only after the accumulated successes of other MTM-produced programs, like *Lou Grant* and *Hill Street Blues*, that critics began to take for granted the particular significance (and uniqueness) of MTM, and by connection, *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*.

signature, built around character complexity, ensemble, empathy, and self-reflexivity. Much of the subsequent discourse about “quality television” implicitly advocated a specific goal—the elevation of television through an appeal to particular potential values of the medium.<sup>4</sup> Many debates about quality TV have centered on how the term has been defined and what has been its political utility when applied to envision an ideal of television.<sup>5</sup> Highlighting the examples of the “best” of television is a worthwhile project, and critics have certainly served as advocates for an ideal of television throughout history. Yet a focus on “quality” television often concentrates on definitional challenges and, more problematically, tends to hierarchize the few programs that fit a particular model of excellence, overlooking the majority of programs that fill the network schedules. Meanwhile, a consideration of “trash” TV risks overbeating the nag of television’s oft-cited faults—its catering to the lowest common denominator by pandering to an audience

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<sup>4</sup> Speaking from the British context, Christine Geraghty advocated a shift from a broader cultural-studies inflected analysis of TV towards a more focused examination of TV aesthetics, like performance, dialogue, and innovation. Christine Geraghty, “Aesthetics and Quality in Popular Television Drama,” *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 6, no. 1 (2003). Robert J. Thompson’s method of evaluation accounts for twelve separate criteria, including pedigree, audience demographics, and genre-mixing. Robert J. Thompson, *Television’s Second Golden Age: From Hill Street Blues to ER* (New York: Continuum, 1996). More recently, cable television, in particular HBO, has claimed the quality moniker for how it differentiates itself from “regular” television, including representations of explicit sex and violence, de-emphasis of plot for character development, and an appeal to an elite, niche audience. David Lavery, ed. *Reading the Sopranos: Hit TV from HBO* (London: IB Taurus, 2006); Marc Leverette, Brian L. Ott, and Cara Louise Buckley, eds., *It’s Not TV: Watching HBO in the Post-Television Era* (New York: Routledge, 2008); Gary R. Edgerton, ed. *Reading Contemporary Television: Mad Men* (London: IB Taurus, 2011). Jason Mittell’s developing work on complex television is also a form of the quality discourse, historicizing the developing of more sophisticated narrative techniques due to a confluence of forces, including technological advances and audience fragmentation. He explicitly denies an evaluative intent, though Elana Levine and Michael Newman include Mittell’s work in their critique of legitimating discourses. Jason Mittell, *Complex TV: The Poetics of Contemporary Television Storytelling* (<http://mediacommons.futureofthebook.org/mcpress/complextelevision>: Media Commons Press, 2012); Michael Z. Newman and Elana Levine, *Legitimizing Television: Media Convergence and Cultural Studies* (New York: Routledge, 2012).

<sup>5</sup> My favorite reference to quality is Toby Miller’s use of the “Q-word” in the preface for *It’s Not TV: Watching HBO in the Post-Television Era*. His ominous phrasing indicates a certain danger in any use of the word “quality,” for the word has a vast and complicated history. Leverette, Ott, and Buckley, *It’s Not TV: Watching HBO in the Post-Television Era*.



unable to distinguish between trash and quality.<sup>6</sup> From the perspective of a study of critics, trash TV was easily panned and then discarded, leaving little evidence of critical deliberations.<sup>7</sup> The middle range of programs, however, offer more opportunity to view critics' process of evaluation over time and issue a corrective to the narrow focus of much TV scholarship upon discourses of "quality."

In this chapter I consider how critics evaluated three programs that have not only been overlooked within TV studies scholarship but also that demonstrate the challenges critics faced evaluating programs that aroused neither great admiration nor great disgust. There is a good deal of literature about the middle range of other media, from book-of-the-month clubs, to a history of the shifting cultural status of Shakespeare, to a consideration of the schmaltz of Celine Dion.<sup>8</sup> Yet there is limited such work about television, so this chapter offers one approach. On offer here are three case studies of *The Waltons*, *Happy Days*, and *Holocaust*, all of which I will refer to as "popular." Popularity can be reflected in ratings data, even though this data is notoriously skewed, deriving its meaning less from its accurate reflection of the mass audience and more

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<sup>6</sup> To avoid this pitfall, Elana Levine frames her discussion in *Wallowing in Sex* of 1970s programs that prominently feature sex through a broader cultural interrogation of the changing mores within American society at that time. Similarly, Laura Grindstaff's *The Money Shot* features an industrial perspective to understand better how talk TV appeals to its audience. Countless works on the soap opera, a debased genre, have concentrated on narrative and aesthetics to elevate the genre. Trash, therefore, tends to be considered against wider cultural concerns. By considering the middle range of programs here, I keep the focus on the critics and their evaluative work. Levine, *Wallowing in Sex: The New Sexual Culture of 1970s American Television*; Laura Grindstaff, *The Money Shot: Trash, Class, and the Making of TV Talk Shows* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002); Robert C. Allen, *Speaking of Soap Operas* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1985).

<sup>7</sup> I initially considered including a program like ABC's *Charlie's Angels* but this show was rarely discussed in its own right, instead lumped with jiggle programs. With my interest in evaluation, the brevity of critical consideration of "trash" TV left little evidence for analysis.

<sup>8</sup> Janice A. Radway, *A Feeling for Books: The Book-of-the-Month Club, Literary Taste, and Middle-Class Desire* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997); Lawrence Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America* (Boston: Harvard University Press, 1990); Carl Wilson, *Let's Talk about Love: A Journey to the End of Taste*, 33 1/2 (New York: Continuum, 2011).

from the industry's dependence upon a standard to translate viewers into currency.<sup>9</sup> Ratings are nevertheless powerful tools through which the TV industry constructs a portrait of its reach and significance, and critics that report, analyze, and promulgate rating news play a role in the construction of the meaning of ratings. Further, by referring to these programs as "popular" I am also intentionally inferring populism, a wide appeal to all potential demographic groupings of the TV audience, from children to grandparents.<sup>10</sup> The term "popular" also implicitly references the mass audience so the case studies below account for how critics positioned themselves in relation to the mass audience. "Popular" programs, therefore, are those shows that the industry and critics recognized as most valuable in terms of advertising rates and as consumed by the widest audience. I argue that all the programs featured in this chapter have been overlooked in historical television scholarship. Their popularity and their populism demands deeper inquiry because their critical reception documents the conscious and unconscious ways critics read a program's value through the value of the audience they imagine viewing that show.

The three programs discussed in this chapter are representative of the programming strategies of all the major broadcast networks, CBS, ABC, and NBC.<sup>11</sup> *The Waltons*, as a non-violent, family-focused hour-long drama was a bit of an outlier among the programs at the top of the ratings in the early 1970s. It also was largely overshadowed by the MTM/Lear sitcoms airing on CBS alongside *The Waltons*. While the first half of the 1970s was dominated by the CBS-

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<sup>9</sup> The ratings, measured by The Nielsen Company, collect data on a sample audience, and from that data issue a numerical count of the mass audience. Their data include both the percentage "share" of the audience and a numerical rating that accounts for the number of viewers in the most desired demographic group.

<sup>10</sup> As Feuer et al argue, MTM programs derived their "quality" status in part through their appeal to a more sophisticated audiences. To some extent, the quality of the audience defined the quality of the programs.

<sup>11</sup> This chapter focuses on commercial network entertainment programs, though the 1970s also featured a real golden age for public broadcasting. How critics evaluated news and public affairs programs is another area where more research is needed.

brand of “relevant” sitcom, nostalgic sitcoms like *Happy Days* marked a new era of the ABC-brand of family-friendly programs later in the decade.<sup>12</sup> *Happy Days*’ significance, therefore, lies partially in its usurping of the energy that had been generated by the relevant programs. As was the case with the MTM and Tandem programs, *Happy Days* generated its own spin-offs, including *Laverne and Shirley* and *Mork and Mindy*, among others. The momentum of the Marshall family of programs led ABC to supplant CBS as the number one network for the first time in twenty years. While the genre of comedy earned new accolades in the 1970s, the miniseries emerged at the end of the decade as a new program format. For much of the 1970s, Hollywood movies pre-empted regularly scheduled programs and earned record ratings, but as the decade progressed, the networks began producing their own multi-part films and miniseries became the new ratings blockbusters.<sup>13</sup> *Holocaust* followed the blockbuster success of *Roots* and became first an American ratings and cultural phenomenon and then a global one.

The case studies below share much in common—they were all ratings successes, they all appealed to a wide audience of viewers, and they all depicted a historical past. *The Waltons* is set during the 1930s Depression-era America, *Happy Days* during 1950s-era America, and *Holocaust* documents the tragedy of 1940s-era World War II Europe. In their evaluations, critics frequently cited a weighing of the authenticity of the world depicted in these programs. Yet the demands of each program’s authenticity differed depending on a range of factors, including the

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<sup>12</sup> I do not discuss *All in the Family* and *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* much in this chapter, largely due to their prominence in other scholarly works. That said, they are always prominent in the background of the cast study of *Happy Days* because Garry Marshall adopted the techniques of Norman Lear’s Tandem and MTM by producing a set of spin-offs that expanded his brand across ABC’s primetime schedule. His programs also played better in the child-friendly hours of the afternoon syndication market. Sitcoms were revitalized for the purposes of syndication with the passage of the Prime Time Access Rule, as the scheduling of half-hour programs best fit the needs of local stations. The Prime Time Access Rule, which I will discuss in more detail in chapter three, returned to local stations the early hours of primetime, and these slots were often filled with syndicated, off-network programs. In fact, *Happy Days* earned record rates on the syndication market.

<sup>13</sup> “Longform Eclipses Sitcom As Program Patterns Alter,” *Variety*, January 5 1977.

relationship between the historical past depicted and the key concerns of the contemporary moment. For instance, *Happy Days* premiered after the Watergate scandal and Nixon's resignation—disenchanted critics therefore held the program accountable for its representation of the past with more intensity than they had with *The Waltons*, which premiered pre-Watergate. The case studies below analyze critical evaluation not exclusively in terms of their aesthetic criteria, then, but also consider the broader cultural factors that influenced critical reception of programs.

Important for my focus, each of the three programs examined here attracted a different collective response from critics in terms of taste and evaluation: *The Waltons* largely earned praise, *Happy Days* earned disdain, and *Holocaust* earned a divergent range of reactions. The analysis below highlights distinctive features about how critics evaluated each program and how their criteria may have shaped their evaluation. For example, *The Waltons* was a program that critics rallied behind, and a producer of the program cited critics as having “saved” the show when it was struggling in the ratings. This case study therefore purported to be the needle in the haystack—evidence that critical writing *can* influence audiences and decision makers at the networks. Yet critics also played a prominent role in establishing the program as doomed, a discourse of failure that positioned *The Waltons* as an underdog in need of saving. My analysis of the case points toward an unintentional collusion between critics and network executives that served to divide critics from their readers and to silence the audience driving the surge in the ratings for *The Waltons*.

*Happy Days* offers an interesting case of a program that critics reviewed, and then reassessed quite differently in later years. While critics in the 1970s did not review individual episodes of programs with regularity, the changes within *Happy Days* each season and the

premieres of each new spin-off drew their attention back to the program and its wider cultural significance.<sup>14</sup> For example, in season three, *Happy Days* improved its ratings by de-emphasizing the original star of the show, regular teenager Richie Cunningham, to increase the visibility of the character of friendly 'hood Arthur Fonzarelli. Many critics worried *Happy Days*' shift in focus towards the Fonz was exploitative, catering to silliness over substance. As their view of *Happy Days* evolved, critics gradually accounted for the program's role in sparking the ratings surge at ABC—a surge driven by critically derided nostalgia sitcoms and sexually laden action series like *Charlie's Angels*. Critical evaluation of *Happy Days* therefore addressed a range of issues, from nostalgia to network strategy to quality. Most troubling, critical disdain for *Happy Days* and ABC also led critics to disparage the audience consuming ABC's programs, and this division between critics and the imagined audience enjoying *Happy Days* narrowed the applicability of their work for a large percentage of the viewing audience.

*Holocaust* provoked a national debate about television, and critics were important interlocutors in these discussions, as authorities over televisual practices, industrial operations, and aesthetic ambitions. Their conversations about *Holocaust* led to a deeper interrogation of the limits of television, including the relationship between advertisements and the programs into which they were inserted, the relative visibility of television's economic imperative, and the potential of the medium to depict an authentic past. In their role as program evaluators, critics delivered more than aesthetic judgments—in fact, aesthetics often took a backseat with discussions of *Holocaust*, displaced by deeper examinations of the program's cultural resonance.

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<sup>14</sup> Despite *The Waltons*' popularity, the copycat family drama programs that it inspired failed one after the other. Included in this list of failed copycats was *Lucas Tanner*, *Sons and Daughters*, *Born Free*, and *Apple's Way*, a program created by the same man who created *The Waltons*, Earl Hamner Jr. The most successful clone of *The Waltons* was *Little House on the Prairie*, based on a series of popular children's books.

## 2.1 A Program Saved by Critics: The Authenticity of *The Waltons*

“This program is so beautiful, it has to die.” ~Advertisement for *The Waltons* in 1972

*The Waltons* was known as a show saved by television critics. Premiering in the fall of 1972, *The Waltons* arrived to a television industry dominated by daring comedies like *All in the Family* and violent action programs like *Mannix*.<sup>15</sup> It had been preceded by a one-off movie special that aired to decent ratings during the Christmas season of 1971 under the name *The Homecoming*.<sup>16</sup> Set in the Virginia mountains during Depression-era America, the show featured the multi-generation Walton family, who struggled financially but thrived through their mutual love and commitment to each other. With meager ratings in its first few weeks on the air, *The Waltons* achieved a bit of a miracle by surviving as a weekly series beyond its first season. Consider these figures: two months into its first season, *The Waltons* ranked 50<sup>th</sup> out of 61 shows, with its timeslot competition, *The Flip Wilson Show* [*Flip*], ranking 7<sup>th</sup> and *The Mod Squad* 27<sup>th</sup>. Three months later, in January 1973, *The Waltons* pulled ahead of *The Mod Squad*, though *Flip* was still in the top 10. After another two months passed, and *The Waltons* climbed to 14<sup>th</sup> place, *Flip* now was in 24<sup>th</sup>, and *The Mod Squad* was stuck at the bottom at 51<sup>st</sup>.<sup>17</sup> Slow and steady growth is certainly in keeping with *The Waltons*' tone, as the show was a somewhat sentimental drama about a family that survives the Depression through hard work, compassion, and persistence. Significantly, *The Waltons*' success was framed in critical writing less as hard

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<sup>15</sup> In April 1972, the top ranked programs were *All in the Family*, *Sanford and Son*, *Mannix*, *Gunsmoke*, and *The Flip Wilson Show*.

<sup>16</sup> *The Homecoming* is actually the second film version of this story of a Depression-era family. *Spencer's Mountain* was a 1963 Warner Bros. feature film starring Henry Fonda and Maureen O'Hara. The film did not do well at the box office, and it is rarely mentioned in the television discourse about *The Waltons*. It was not unusual for a network to build a series from a one-off film in the 1970s, a strategy that not only boosted audience familiarity with the series but also allowed the networks to feature a “special” during a decade when movies on television were frequent ratings winners.

<sup>17</sup> Cecil Smith, “Michael Learned Finds a New Family with *The Waltons*,” *Los Angeles Times*, April 15 1973.

work rewarded and more as a miracle. *The Waltons* was a non-political show in a time of the social issue sitcom, it offered sentiment when violent police procedurals dominated, and it featured no stars. The program was indeed doomed, or so the critical discourse made it seem. *The Waltons*' "miracle," however, was itself produced by and dependent on the discourse of failure that accompanied the show's premiere.

Television critics played a prominent role in constructing and reinforcing this discourse of failure from 1972 to 1974, at which point the program had become an established feature in the CBS schedule.<sup>18</sup> Their experience of watching programs they enjoyed fail to find a mass audience year after year led critics to believe that *The Waltons* could not succeed in a programming landscape dominated by relevant comedies and violent action programs. Critics enjoyed *The Waltons*, so their predictions that it would not survive beyond its first season worried them. As I discuss in more detail below, critics praised *The Waltons* for the natural performances of its stars, the careful balance of sentiment over sap, and for the strong voice of Earl Hamner, Jr., who oversaw the writing of every script and voiced the narrator in each episode. The Waltons particularly impressed critics because it made them feel for the characters without showing its hand, without visible manipulation.<sup>19</sup> I use the word "visible" to emphasize that critics fully acknowledged the role Hamner played in controlling the program's emotional content—critics were moved by *The Waltons*, but they did not feel exploited because Hamner did not resort to cheap plotting, instead pulling from a truth based in human compassion. Calling

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<sup>18</sup> *The Waltons* would continue to air new episodes until 1981, surviving on the air despite the death of Will Geer, who played Grandpa Walton, the stroke of Ellen Corby, who played Grandma Walton, and the departure of star Richard Thomas, who played John-Boy and left the series in 1977, returning only occasionally as a guest star. Critics also continued to praise its consistent quality in the later years of the program's run.

<sup>19</sup> One prominent feature of critical discourse about *The Waltons* and *Holocaust* is the danger of the melodrama genre. Appealing directly to viewer emotions, melodrama could too easily slip from heart-rending to pandering, so critics admired the way Hamner asserted his control over the seasons.

the program “authentic,” critics employed the term to reference an emotional integrity rather than an accurate historical rendering of 1930s Depression-era U.S.

Before *The Waltons* premiered as a weekly series, critics had already determined that it would not survive the season. An oft-mentioned anecdote depicted one cynical critic at press tour in Los Angeles asking Earl Hamner Jr., the show’s creator, how he would feel when Nielsen canceled his life—a humorous yet biting reference to the fact that the show was based on Hamner’s own childhood. Herb Jacobs of Telcom Associates, a consultant for local TV station groups, predicted in fall 1972 that *The Waltons* would be demolished by the competition, garnering only a 24 share, short the requisite 30% share of the TV audience that would earn a program renewal at that time.<sup>20</sup> Despite his grim prediction, Jacobs did note that he expected critics to love *The Waltons*. For the most part, he was right—critics did love the program. Cecil Smith, for example, called the series “deeply moving and human.”<sup>21</sup> *The New York Times*’ O’Connor praised its “disarming simplicity that carefully avoids becoming simple-minded.”<sup>22</sup> And the *Chicago Tribune*’s Clarence Petersen called the premiere “touching and dramatic.”<sup>23</sup>

Nevertheless, many critics repeated the pessimistic predictions described above in their early reviews. Laurence Laurent of *The Washington Post* referred to the show as a “throwaway” because of its position in the CBS schedule, against two top twenty programs. Speaking from some twenty years of experience writing about television, Laurent’s analysis came from years of seeing programs rejected or ignored by an audience already committed to other, established

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<sup>20</sup> Jacobs enjoyed a reasonably accurate record predicting the success and failure of TV programs each fall at the NAB Convention, but among his biggest “misses” was his prediction that *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* would not only fail but would be the first canceled. “Telcom’s Jacobs Likes CBS in Fall Ratings Race, Sees ABC, NBC Tied,” *Variety*, April 12 1972.

<sup>21</sup> Cecil Smith, “Opening Chapter of ‘The Waltons’,” *Los Angeles Times*, September 14 1972.

<sup>22</sup> John J. O’Connor, “Varying Program Norms with ‘Family Entertainment’,” *New York Times*, September 14 1972.

<sup>23</sup> Clarence Petersen, “Can a Series Cut It on Mere Quality?,” *Chicago Tribune*, September 14 1972.



shows. The *Chicago Tribune*'s Petersen echoed Laurent's concern for *The Waltons*' fate. The title of Petersen's piece, "Can a Series Cut It on Mere Quality?" made clear that Petersen was already a fan of the program.<sup>24</sup> Yet in answering his own question, Petersen listed the many factors against *The Waltons*' survival: "This new one-hour series is given no chance at all to succeed in the ratings race. The debut isn't funny. It isn't violent. It lacks a charismatic hero...Except for two chaste kisses, there is no suggestion of sex. *The Waltons* breaks all the rules. Except one: It's entertaining." As indicated by Petersen and Laurent, critics expected that the quality of the cast and the writing would not "read" in the ratings data, a harsh marker of economic value, not emotional appeal.

Petersen's passive voice in the quote—"This new one-hour series is given no chance at all to succeed"—reflected a certain disavowal of the prediction. At the same time, he nevertheless reinforced it through repetition—some nameless person or persons had given the series no chance. This veiled reference pulled from numerous sources—press tour comments by industry figures, Herb Jacobs, and other critics. Because Petersen did not cite a subject as the figure giving the program no chance, his rhetoric suggested a pervasive and dangerous rejection of *The Waltons* throughout the industry. More troubling, without a subject, the person giving the show no chance could not be addressed, challenged, or persuaded. That the subject of the sentence was unknown was untrue, of course. Although Petersen was likely critiquing the executives at CBS who scheduled *The Waltons* in such a difficult time slot, the program's ultimate success or failure depended on the Nielsen audience—those 1,200 Nielsen families (fewer families if one considered that New York and Los Angeles were the first ratings numbers to be delivered into executive hands) whose viewing habits provided the data for ratings

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<sup>24</sup> Petersen's use of quality here refers to the program's production values—he finds the show entertaining, with a fine cast, and few gimmicks.

measurements. The Nielsen families remained an elusive, unknowable specter here. In a follow-up piece, Petersen explained that he received a copy of his *Waltons* article in the mail, sent by an unnamed “high-ranking NY television executive,” with the word NO next to Petersen’s central question—“can *The Waltons* Cut it on Mere Quality?” With all this talk of failure, it is no wonder *The Waltons* became known as a show in desperate need of saving, doomed before one episode had aired.

When *The Waltons* survived its first season, *Waltons* producer and head of Lorimar Productions Lee Rich credited critics with the program’s survival.<sup>25</sup> Four years later, the *New York Times*’ John J. O’Connor cited the efforts of critics as an established part of *The Waltons* lore: “an unusual number of reviewers persisted in hawking the new product, in bringing individual episodes to their readers’ attention, and *The Waltons* slowly climbed up the crucial ratings pole.”<sup>26</sup> Interestingly, critics themselves rarely claimed any influence over a program’s success or failure, whether *The Waltons* or other shows. Cecil Smith, after noting Rich’s praise of critical support for his show, conceded that he must reject the honor. He cited a recent study published by Charles Steinberg that reported the results of two surveys of the nation’s TV critics. Steinberg, a former Vice President for public relations at CBS, found that over half of critics denied their work could save a struggling program.<sup>27</sup> Smith confirmed the findings of the study, agreeing that he and many of his peers doubted their powers of persuasion in asking TV executives to privilege strong work over ratings.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Cecil Smith, “Changing Portrait of the TV Critic,” *Los Angeles Times*, September 24 1973.

<sup>26</sup> John J. O’Connor, “John-Boy Splits for the Big Apple,” *New York Times*, March 17 1977.

<sup>27</sup> Steinberg, “The Compleat Television Critic,” 9. Indeed, only 3% of critics who responded to the survey claimed their work had any influence whatsoever on program executives.

<sup>28</sup> Smith’s admittance is perhaps most notable because he cultivated a persona as an TV insider—with easy access to production sets and executives. His denial of deeper influence is particularly resonant.

With critics themselves denying their power over the program's success, producer Rich's insistence that they played a crucial role speaks less to their powers of persuasion and more to their indelible yet complicated relationship with the TV industry, a partnership of give, take, and struggle. The discourse of failure constructed by CBS in tandem with critical writings was not only artificial but also disingenuous. Critics themselves admitted their lack of control over which programs thrived. The most troubling aspect of this clear line of conversation between the industry and journalistic critics was an unstated anxiety about the Nielsen audience. Repeated declarations that *The Waltons* was doomed developed a straw man argument of the indiscriminating mass audience. In this way, the critics and industry together reinforced the longstanding perception of the mass TV audience as passive and naïve and of critics as distinct from and superior to the mass audience.

Placing attention on the role of critics in saving *The Waltons* furthermore obscured the level of promotional support lent to *The Waltons* by its home network, top-ranked CBS. In December of 1972, CBS placed an ad in four publications—*Variety*, *Broadcasting*, *The New York Times*, and *Time* magazine [see Figure 1]. A \$50,000 expenditure, the ad made an impassioned plea to audiences to do their part to save this gem—a program that was “too good” for television. The ad promised that CBS stood behind the show: “CBS believes that there are enough of us around—even in this super-sophisticated day and age—who can still respond to some old-fashioned notions like respect, and dignity, and love. Who aren’t embarrassed by an honest lump in the throat.”<sup>29</sup> Despite this denial of sophistication, the ad nevertheless was bordered by quote after quote from critical reviews. Drawing from the reviews of critics—with more than one quote predicting the show’s failure—the ad offered a challenge to readers: “And if there are enough of us [who watch the show], *The Waltons* may even fool the critics and live

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<sup>29</sup> "Display Ad 78," *New York Times*, November 30 1972.

next year.” Critics were at once cited as supporters of the program and as potential antagonists for the audience. The ad characterized critics as cynics while the industry executives crying over *The Waltons* shared the same emotional sensitivity of viewers seeing the ad.

The strategy employed within this ad was indeed sophisticated, a master class in controlled tension that transformed the critic into an unwitting ally who advanced corporate interests. It asked audiences to defy critics, even while it offered critics’ words as a testament to the program’s value. It addressed readers through the second-person pronoun “we,” implying that the executives funding the ad were equal to the viewers sought by the program, an equivocation that denied the power of the networks to determine the show’s success. Even its language of defiance seemed a paradox, for it urged viewers to watch the program as an act of rebellion that nevertheless perpetuated a system based on mass ratings data and the transformation of audiences into advertising dollars. Remarkably the ad removed the critic’s mediating position between the industry and the audience, employing the critic instead as a barrier to the industry’s successful delivery of programs to audience (and thereby delivery of audiences to advertisers). The ad featured a masterful merger of disparate intentions, manipulating viewers through an appeal to agency when in truth, ratings data only reflected a small minority of the audience. These tensions are productive in exposing the relative power of press coverage of television through the complex interactions of industry-critic-audience.

The seeming contradictions evident in the ad are somewhat ameliorated by considering the placement of the four ads—in two industry trade publications and two national publications. For whom was this ad intended? Certainly not for regular TV viewers, who were unlikely to read *Variety* and *Broadcasting*. As noted by Todd Gitlin in his landmark look at the TV industry, *Inside Prime Time*, executives reported regularly reading the trades, *The New York Times*, and

either *Time* or *Newsweek*.<sup>30</sup> CBS's public support of the show in this ad, therefore, addressed fellow industry workers and cultural elites more than average viewers. This partially explains the ad's repeated references to men crying, "doing something as 'unmanly' as being moved by a tender, sentimental story." Framed as an invitation to viewers to watch *The Waltons*, the ad concurrently portrayed CBS as not only supportive of a wholesome program but also as willing to act beyond pure commercial interest. What CBS was selling to their fellow industry executives reading *Variety* and *Broadcasting* was the network's self-image.

CBS had long nurtured its reputation as the "Tiffany network," known for its high quality, but *The Waltons* was an anomaly that CBS needed to accommodate under its broader corporate brand. When *The Waltons* premiered in 1972, CBS had recently undertaken a dramatic shift in network strategy to maintain its position as the number one network. After NBC's Operation 100 campaign,<sup>31</sup> in reaction to NBC almost defeating CBS in the yearly ratings matchup, CBS cancelled its "hayseed" programs like *Green Acres* and *Hee Haw* and shifted instead to "relevant" programming, like *All in the Family* and *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*.<sup>32</sup> *The Waltons* was more akin to the former hayseed programs than to the sitcoms set in contemporary time and featuring more daring content. As such, this ad worked to alleviate the disconnect between CBS's most prominent relevant programs in 1972, assigning to *The Waltons* the quality it required to be a product of the Tiffany network. CBS stated its support explicitly in

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<sup>30</sup> Gitlin, *Inside Prime Time*: 204.

<sup>31</sup> I describe Operation 100 in a bit more detail later in the chapter, but this term references a programming strategy employed by CBS executive Mike Dann during the 1968-1969 season, when NBC began to pull ahead of CBS in the overall season ratings race.

<sup>32</sup> In critical discourse, the "relevant" trend came and went almost immediately, with a number of high profile shows, like *The Young Lawyers* and *The Interns*, failing to catch on with audiences. The comedic programs that we most associate with "relevancy," including *All in the Family* and *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, actually premiered in January, after CBS had already moved away from "relevant" the social dramas associated with the term to emphasize instead comedy. Les Brown, "TV's Stillborn 'Relevancy'," *Variety*, September 30 1970.

the ad: “[*The Waltons*] will remain alive until the end of this season, because some people here at CBS believe there are enough of us around—even in this super-sophisticated day and age—who can still respond to some old-fashioned notions like respect, and dignity, and love.”<sup>33</sup> Though the ad does not employ the term “quality,” it nevertheless ascribes to the program a genuineness, an authenticity that marks it deeper cultural value.

The ad’s savviest move, however, was its employment of a discourse of failure to position *The Waltons* as THE ratings story of the following year, establishing the foundation of a narrative of the program defeating the odds. As the quotes from critics along each side of the ad testified, *The Waltons* was not long for the world: “The show is so totally natural...you have to worry about its survival,” and “Please, folks, don’t let this one die.” Two years after its premiere, *Variety*’s Bob Knight picked up the failure predications to present *The Waltons* as victorious in 1974: “Nobody anywhere last Jan. 1 was predicting that within the year *The Waltons* would become the third ranking series it had become by Jan. 1, 1974...Nor did anyone anticipate that the concept of warm and homey, nonviolent drama would have become, a year later, the most likely prospect to be the programming trend of the 1974-75 pilot season.” Knight may have been surprised, but certainly the folks at CBS were not. CBS not only predicted *The Waltons* survival in its \$50K ad campaign but also offered the language for journalists to use when they later wrote about the miracle on Walton’s mountain. *The Waltons* could not be a surprising success—a doomed program saved by critics—unless those same critics adopted and disseminated a discourse of failure.

Beyond failure, the trope that dominated most journalistic discussions of *The Waltons* was authenticity, a narrative framing advanced frequently in feature stories about the program’s actors. More than promotion, these pieces provided deeper insight into how the critics negotiated

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<sup>33</sup> “This Program is So Beautiful, It Has to Die,” *New York Times*, November 30 1972.

the network's efforts to control the program's meaning. At the most basic level, critics reinforced dominant narratives about the program disseminated from the network PR teams. For example, Richard Thomas, part of the cast of *The Homecoming*, attracted the admiration of critics for the naturalness of his performance as John-Boy Walton. His performance fit in well with the program's tone and setting. Yet the critics encountered a problem when discussing the actor himself, as Thomas had little connection to the character he played. As the son of classically trained dancers, Thomas toured Europe and South America as a child and trained to be a ballet dancer. Despite his rather distinctive upbringing, critical writings repeatedly presented Thomas as uniquely qualified to portray John-Boy. In an interview with the *Los Angeles Times*' critic Smith, for instance, Thomas created explicit links between himself and his character: "My dad's folks were Welsh coal miners. They settled in the mountains of Kentucky around Paintsville—he was born at Muddy Branch. We used to spend vacations there...I sometimes felt like I was living that story, not acting it."<sup>34</sup> Smith's column thus served as a vehicle for Thomas to elevate his "vacation" life over the larger portions of his childhood traveling with a dance company, foregrounding a childhood memory more appropriate for his character.<sup>35</sup>

Critics did not always deliver the network's top-down narrative without comment, however. Sometimes their work highlighted the constructed nature of actor profiles. Lawrence Laurent conceded that Thomas' "naturalness" was the product of genuine effort: "In real life, he's almost as rural as Noel Coward...The training, apparently, has enabled him to become convincing in a role much younger than himself and in a setting in which he never lived."<sup>36</sup> Laurent made a virtue of Thomas's difference, but the desire to explain his exceptional

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<sup>34</sup> Smith, "Michael Learned Finds a New Family with The Waltons."

<sup>35</sup> The fact that he was largely raised in the communist country of Cuba likely raised an eyebrow or two among the conservative audience that was the target demographic of the program.

<sup>36</sup> Laurent, "A Warm, Homespun Series," *Washington Post*.

performance remained a constant in critical discourse. In a profile piece about Richard Thomas, *New York Times* culture reporter Joyce Maynard described the machinery at work in Richard's interview strategies.<sup>37</sup> When she quoted Thomas, she also interjected her own reading of his statement: "After mentioning that he seems a bit insecure about being a TV actor, he segues: 'Listen,' he says, and I have the feeling that this thought has been prepared, 'what keeps the show on is quality, not violence or comedy or variety. *The Waltons* is very low-key; the only thing that keeps people watching is the characters.'" <sup>38</sup> In his use of quality, Thomas asserted the importance of the integrity of the characters and performances to the value of *The Waltons*, and Maynard exposed this as a construction. In their journalistic writing, critics wielded the power to reinforce or question the top-down narrative of authenticity. As Laurent and Maynard demonstrated, critics generally negotiated their need for a story with the industry's need for a coherent extra-programmatic narrative.

In three different profiles of Michael Learned, who portrayed John-Boy's mother Olivia Walton, critics again negotiated her authenticity despite her elite life experiences and beauty.<sup>39</sup> Learned, like Thomas, did not possess a background story appropriate to the role she performed. Having grown up in Europe, Learned married a classically trained actor and performed in the regional repertory theatre circuit. She did not immediately call to mind a humble and hard-working housewife. Yet like Thomas, Learned found isolated moments in her otherwise glamorous life to confirm her connection to Olivia: "Olivia and I are not so far apart as all

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<sup>37</sup> Maynard was a female journalist for the *New York Times* who wrote actor profiles and other cultural pieces about television.

<sup>38</sup> Joyce Maynard, "John-Boy Comes Home—to Manhattan," *New York Times*, July 22 1973.

<sup>39</sup> Learned replaced film actress Patricia Neal as the mother character, for Neal's portrayal of Olivia was deemed a bit too grand, according to the critic at *Variety*: "Miss Neal, having difficulties with her accent, seemed to be giving too studied a performance as the mother, with the contrast becoming more pronounced because everyone else — save one—was so naturally at ease, accent or no." Bob Knight, "Review: The Homecoming," *Variety*, December 22 1971.



that...For a while when I was a girl, we lived on a farm in Connecticut and raised goats. No one at school would sit near me because I smelled of goat.”<sup>40</sup> The detail of the goat, in particular, helped to humble this tall, thin, blonde beauty, justifying her performance as Olivia, a woman who gave up a career as an opera singer for a quiet life on an isolated mountain. Learned’s beauty was a particular sticking point in the show’s claim of a memory-inflected realism. A piece in the *Washington Post*, for instance, provided three photos of Learned—one glamorous, one as a working actress, and one as simple Olivia Walton—transformations all.<sup>41</sup> [See Figure 2] In the piece, Laurent goes so far as to note that fans of the program only recognized Learned as Olivia when she left the house without makeup. This over-determined effort to “explain” how this lovely woman could be believable as a mousy housewife served as a testament to the program’s dependence on a carefully packaged truthfulness.

In a profile of Will Geer, who played the grandfather on *The Waltons*, Cecil Smith did not include a prominent detail from Geer’s professional past that would have undermined the authenticity of his performance. Suspected of close ties to communist forces infiltrating the American entertainment industry, Geer was blacklisted by Hollywood during the 1950s. Yet throughout his extended interview with Geer, Smith never once mentioned this detail about Geer’s life. This “oversight” was most apparent because Smith did not remove from Geer’s persona all trace of danger. At the beginning of the article, Smith related an anecdote in which Charlie Chaplin, himself a suspected communist sympathizer, referred to Geer and his friends as the “young revolutionaries.”<sup>42</sup> Smith coded Geer’s past as an “intellectual,” not a political revolutionary, and the interview aligned Geer with corny Americana. For example, Geer

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<sup>40</sup> Smith, “Michael Learned Finds a New Family with The Waltons.”

<sup>41</sup> Lawrence Laurent, “Michael is the Mother on 'The Waltons',” *Washington Post*, December 2 1973.

<sup>42</sup> Chaplin was himself threatened by the Black List for his noted Marxist sympathies, prompting Chaplin to leave the U.S.

presented an image of himself and the program as rural Americana: “This is not treacle. It is good, sweet American corn, that’s what it is.”<sup>43</sup> Geer also insisted this was the type of work he wanted to do—what he called “folklore drama,” despite the objections of his “intellectual” friends. In his framing of Geer as deeply American and proud of it, and in his elision of the blacklist, Smith’s profile became an elaborate defense of Geer, obscuring problematic details from his past while reinforcing his deep understanding of the character of Grandpa Walton. Critics may not have had the power to save a program, but they did have power in how they packaged the actors they featured. Authenticity therefore derived as much from what was not said as what was said in a journalistic feature story.

More than the actors, *Waltons*’ creator Earl Hamner Jr. most embodied the authenticity the program strove to achieve. Critics framed Hamner at once as a sort of hillbilly auteur and a requisite industry professional. That these two qualities did not undermine each other served as a testament to Hamner’s true genius—he balanced effectively the glamour of working in Hollywood that would undermine the program’s simple pleasures. In his praise of *The Waltons*, Cecil Smith credited Hamner with years of training “in the bullpen of the NBC writers’ room in New York” and with a strong sense of his voice as a writer of soft entertainment. Smith quoted Hamner, unafraid to acknowledge his goody-goody image, as saying, “what I am is Pollyanna.”<sup>44</sup> Hamner functioned not only as the author of the series but also a savvy public relations figure, knowing how to employ the press, especially critics, to provide a consistent narrative of *The Waltons*’ intended virtues.

Hamner’s industry savvy reassured critics like Smith, who worried the program would devolve from a subtle realism to a blunt sentimentality. No one better summed up Hamner’s

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<sup>43</sup> Cecil Smith, “Will Geer: Waltons Good Sweet American Corn,” *Los Angeles Times*, December 17 1972.

<sup>44</sup> Cecil Smith, “Family-Type Film Just a One-Shot,” *Los Angeles Times*, October 20 1971.

avoidance of the sentiment and sap that typically befell the family drama than Gary Deeb, with his customary caustic wit. Discussing several programs that tried and failed to copy *The Waltons* formula, Deeb growled, “The trouble with TV’s recent trend toward warm-hearted family drama is that the programs usually tend to be so confectionary-sweet and synthetic, you want to maim, harm, and disfigure the producers and writers responsible for such exploitative doggerel.”<sup>45</sup> Critics admired Hamner for his quality control—rather than allow *The Waltons* to deliver empty sentiment, Hamner reviewed every script to deliver believable characters and plotlines. A quid pro quo is evident here—critics reinforced Hamner’s authenticity and he provided access to himself and the production so critics could feature a popular program in their column. Hamner could not cultivate his “down-home” appeal without the willingness of journalists to reference repeatedly the “cornpone” he added to the scripts. In this way, the program’s narrative extended far beyond the apparatus, elevating the work of critics to co-authors of the meaning construction of television.<sup>46</sup>

The primary obstacle standing between Hamner’s intentions and the program’s verisimilitude was often the business of television itself. Previous success tended to serve as a marker for reliable programming in television, a fact that the *New York Times*’ John J. O’Connor despaired, “too much of television is the product of hacks working in an artistic sausage factory. Perhaps it’s the nature of the medium.”<sup>47</sup> O’Connor here alluded to commonly disparaged aspects of television, including a lack of distinction among its authors, a mishmash of content

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<sup>45</sup> One of these “copies” of *The Waltons* formula was *Apple’s Way*, helmed by Hamner himself. Magic did not strike twice: “*Apple’s Way* was so militantly sweet, so awe-inspiringly affirmative that *The Waltons*, by comparison, seemed to be a clan of vicious cynics.” Gary Deeb, “The Waltons Prove Copying Doesn’t Pay,” *Chicago Tribune*, December 12 1974.

<sup>46</sup> Jonathan Gray’s work on the paratext has considered the constitutive contributions of TV critics to televisual meaning. Here we see an early operation of this sort of meaning construction. Gray, *Show Sold Separately: Promos, Spoilers and Other Media Paratexts*.

<sup>47</sup> O’Connor, “Just Too Many Cops and Robbers.”

forced into a generic form, and the commercial motivations that drove the industry to avoid risk and privilege repetition. O'Connor did not praise *The Waltons* as did other critics, yet he nevertheless admired the fortitude of Hamner against the homogenizing forces of the television industry. When he included *The Waltons* in his year-end top ten in 1972, he praised Hamner and producer Lee Rich's ability to transcend the sausage factory: "some secrets of its success: a remarkably steady supply of good scripts, intelligent direction, and fine performances."<sup>48</sup>

Hamner acted as a palliative for critics wanting something new on TV, and even hard-to-please O'Connor credited his unique voice amidst an industry that enforced an appeal to the lowest-common denominator. The greatest danger, threatened by the sausage factory of television, was the thin line between authenticity and pandering. Hamner and the critics acknowledged this danger, as Cecil Smith observed, "Hamner has warned that to succeed, the show must 'walk that fine line between excessive sentimentality and believable human warmth.'"<sup>49</sup> Through his careful navigation of the television industry, then, Hamner protected his program from becoming too much like the rest of TV.

Hidden within but always present within the critical discourse was a deeper accusation that it was the audience against which *The Waltons*' heroes battled. Deeb reflected the extreme view of the industry's exploitation of a passive audience in his (often repeated) anecdote about the condescension of the industry towards the viewing public: "A rugged old TV producer once cornered me at a cocktail party and, literally endowed with some 86-proof truth serum, told me he figured the mass American audience would buy pig sweat, as long as you dyed it pink and put it inside a pretty bottle."<sup>50</sup> Deeb's use of this quote purported an encouragement to his readers to rebel against the monotony of typical TV fare. That said, critics depended on the audience to

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<sup>48</sup> John J. O'Connor, "The Best of 1972...And the Worst.," December 31 1972.

<sup>49</sup> Smith, "Opening Chapter of 'The Waltons'."

<sup>50</sup> Deeb, "The Waltons Prove Copying Doesn't Pay," B12.

confirm a program's longevity by delivering ratings numbers—this created a difficult give and take between critics and the television audience. The critic shared opinions and information with readers but then depended on the (Nielsen) viewers to watch the program. It is worth noting that a discourse of failure demonstrated no confidence that viewers would see the same value in *The Waltons* that critics saw.

The discourse of failure also served as a subtle reinforcement of the myth of ratings accuracy, or at least their validity. For example, O'Connor contemplated whether *The Waltons* would find an audience as a test of the audience's ability to find a good program: "If nothing else, it will be interesting to see if the public has any appetite for good family entertainment."<sup>51</sup> For O'Connor, then, the ratings would serve as a trustworthy reflection of the audience's capacity to recognize quality. Hamner, too, framed the program as a sort of "gift" for audiences—an opportunity for them to vote with their program selection: "I think there is a need for *The Waltons*. Audiences in all entertainment media have been brutalized by crudities, vulgarity, violence, indifference and ineptitude. On *The Waltons* we are attempting to make an honest, positive statement on the affirmation of man."<sup>52</sup> Critics and network executives consistently placed the burden of success on the audience's ability to accept uplifting programming. This version of the "give the audience what it wants" argument reinscribed the accuracy of ratings as a reflection not only of viewing patterns but also of the fundamental desires (and worth) of the audience. Critics described *The Waltons* as a test case to determine what the audience wanted from television: programs of social value or programs of mindless distraction. For example, the *Washington Post*'s John Carmody quoted CBS executive Robert Wood hoping that the audience that would recognize *The Waltons*' value: "I thought the

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<sup>51</sup> O'Connor, "Varying Program Norms with 'Family Entertainment'."

<sup>52</sup> Earl Jr. Hamner, "Genuine Walton Recalls His Youth," *Los Angeles Times*, November 2 1972.

country was ready for something like this,' [Wood] said."<sup>53</sup> Should *The Waltons* fail, it follows, it would be the fault of an audience not "ready" to accept a good program.

The audience may have served as the hypothetical enemy of *The Waltons*, but when the program did succeed, it was revealing that everyone *but* the audience gained the credit: the critics, the program's creator, its producers, the network...on down the line were cited by critics in print publications as supporting *The Waltons'* renewal. Yet rarely did critics celebrate *The Waltons'* audience as a contributory force. While the evaluative discussions of the critic revealed their negotiated power through their relationship with the industry, they also highlighted how often the audience tended to be marginalized or vilified by critics. Despite their explicit relationship with readers/viewers, critics often referenced the mass audience as if they were distinct from their readership. This contentious nature is demonstrated more fully in the next case study of *Happy Days*. Like *The Waltons*, *Happy Days* featured family-friendly fare and old-fashioned values. In addition, both programs shared the guiding hand of executive Fred Silverman, an up-and-coming network programmer at CBS and, subsequently, ABC. *Happy Days* also premiered to humble ratings, like *The Waltons*. Unlike *The Waltons*, though, critics did not widely rally around *Happy Days*. The program also was not widely panned. Instead it arrived to find critics largely shrugging their shoulders. When it became more popular with audiences, however, critics' attention shifted primarily to examine how the program exemplified ABC's intensifying pandering to the audience. If *The Waltons* is the example of a show saved by everyone but the audience, *Happy Days* is a show destroyed by everyone, especially the audience.

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<sup>53</sup> John Carmody, "A Media Tale," *Washington Post*, January 5 1973, B1.

## 2.2 Happy Days: *The Program that Jumped the Shark and Built a Network*

“Prestige doesn’t, and shouldn’t, come easily” ~John J. O’Connor, *New York Times*<sup>54</sup>

The legacy of *Happy Days* has provided the show with a unique notoriety. This 1970s sitcom may be most well known today as the inspiration for the popular phrase “jumped the shark,” used to mark the moment when a good show begins its inevitable decline into becoming a very bad show.<sup>55</sup> The phrase originated from the premiere episode of *Happy Days*’ fifth season, in which fan-favorite character Fonzie water skis (in his leather jacket) and literally jumps over a shark.<sup>56</sup> [See Figure 3] This tongue-in-cheek phrase obscures the broader importance of *Happy Days*, however, by over-emphasizing the program’s later years of decline. The character of Fonzie did draw a certain amount of critical ire later in the program’s run, but he was simply one contention in a larger conversation about the rise of ABC and its strategy of mass appeal programming. This section reconsiders the significance of *Happy Days* by examining its critical reception during the first three years of its run. As reporters and evaluators, critics traced the emergence of both *Happy Days* and ABC as media phenomena, and their stories are essentially interconnected. Critical writing about *Happy Days*, therefore, provides a unique entry point to a grounded examination of the programming strategy of what powered ABC’s rise as the #1 network in the nation.

ABC’s supplanting of CBS in the ratings was shocking. First, CBS had dominated the network rankings for over twenty years based on its brand as the “Tiffany” network with the highest quality programs. Second, ABC suffered from a deficit that limited its potential for most

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<sup>54</sup> John J. O’Connor, “Catching Up, Taking Notice, and Gaining Perspective,” *New York Times*, November 20 1977.

<sup>55</sup> “Jumping the Shark,” Wikipedia.com, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jump\\_the\\_shark](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jump_the_shark).

<sup>56</sup> You can read the writer of the “Jump the Shark” episode of *Happy Days* respond to criticism of his work here: Kate Stanhope, “Happy Days Writer Defends ‘Jump the Shark’ Moment,” *tvguide.com*, <http://www.tvguide.com/JumpTheShark/Happy-Days-Writer-1022609.aspx>.

of those twenty years—it enjoyed fewer affiliate station contracts, which limited its reach, its advertising rates, and its financial earnings. The fact that ABC always ran in last place, behind NBC and CBS, seemed an inevitability within critical discourse. Gary Deeb snidely stated, “An anonymous philosopher once said, ‘There are three networks and ABC is third. If there were 33 networks, ABC would be 33<sup>rd</sup>.’”<sup>57</sup> The new ratings and financial strength of ABC at the end of the 1970s, therefore, attracted a good deal of attention in print publications as journalists investigated how and why ABC was now defeating NBC and CBS.

*Happy Days* premiered to fair ratings, with a 34 share, a 15<sup>th</sup> place ranking, and middling critical evaluations.<sup>58</sup> For example, Lawrence Laurent noted about the show, “the quality of the series is neither particularly high nor offensively low.”<sup>59</sup> There is a remarkable consistency in the first reviews of *Happy Days*. They typically identified a series of antecedents for *Happy Days* and critiqued its lack of originality in its appeal to nostalgia. For example, Cecil Smith panned *Happy Days* outright, finding parallels with the portrayal of Dobie Gillis that placed *Happy Days* in a poor light: “The second ‘new’ offering of the ‘new’ season...is an awful hunk of nostalgic claptrap called *Happy Days*, which is really Dobie Gillis revisited without the wit.”<sup>60</sup> The *New York Times*’ O’Connor commented: “*Happy Days* is a little more than the same old Henry Aldrich sandwich, dressed with the salt of more ‘relevance’ and the store-bought mayonnaise of nostalgia.” In his review for *Variety*, Bob Knight also compared the program to television antecedents Dobie Gillis and Henry Aldrich, teen characters from programs airing in the 1950s, the same decade in which *Happy Days* was set. Assessing the program’s attraction, Knight considered its successful appeal to nostalgia: “*Happy Days* is another dose of the escapist

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<sup>57</sup> Gary Deeb, “ABC Casts Breaking of a President,” *Chicago Tribune*, 25 October 1974.

<sup>58</sup> Gary Deeb, “ABC Stretch Drive Pays Off in Ratings,” *Chicago Tribune*, January 29 1974.

<sup>59</sup> Lawrence Laurent, “‘Happy Days’ Opposes Trend to Hostility,” *Washington Post*, December 22 1974.

<sup>60</sup> Cecil Smith, “‘New’ Offerings for ‘New’ Season,” *Los Angeles Times*, January 15 1974.



razzmatazz that nostalgic lookbacks should only remember the simple pleasures (and stereotypes) of a past era.”<sup>61</sup> For Knight, O’Connor, and Smith, *Happy Days* repeated a longstanding tendency in television to recycle past successes, to opt for simplicity over complexity, and to appeal to a fantasy narrative of days gone by.

It was not unusual for television to find inspiration in past successes, yet Smith and O’Connor condemned the program for its less successful version of the past projects. John J. O’Connor was annoyed at the lack of originality on display in *Happy Days*, even using the term “duplication factory” to highlight the program’s debt to 1973 film *American Graffiti*, which starred Ron Howard who also starred in *Happy Days*.<sup>62</sup> When Lawrence Laurent compared *Happy Days* to its contemporary programs like *All in the Family*, he did so to contrast it as a “soft” comedy when compared to the “hostility” comedies of Lear and MTM. He doubted there would be a large enough audience for a nostalgic throwback to the 1950s style of television comedy.<sup>63</sup> All the critics so far mentioned did not, therefore, evaluate *Happy Days* on its own terms, necessarily, but instead considered how it stacked up against past programs. None of these critics evaluated whether *Happy Days*, a sitcom, was funny.

Surprisingly, only Tom Shales of *The Washington Post* discussed *Happy Days*’ direct forebear, *Love, American Style*, another program developed by *Happy Days*’ creator Garry Marshall. When Marshall’s original pitch in 1969 for *Happy Days* failed to impress executives at two networks, he adapted and developed anthology program *Love, American Style*. Shales pointed out his fellow critics’ oversight of *Love, American Style* because he was intrigued by why nostalgia, as a pitch, failed five years prior but had now found a renewed interest in 1974.

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<sup>61</sup> Bob Knight, "Review: Happy Days," *Variety*, January 23 1974.

<sup>62</sup> In other words, *Happy Days* seemed guilty of originating from the same sausage factory that *The Waltons* avoided.

<sup>63</sup> Laurent, "'Happy Days' Opposes Trend to Hostility."

Shales pondered the significance of the program's historical (in)accuracy through the lens of nostalgia:

It may be futile, though, to complain that *Happy Days* lacks an authentic 50s sensibility, that it eschews honest retrospection for superficial gags. We don't expect from a TV series much in the way of diligent or thorough period portrayals. Nobody can seriously believe that *The Waltons* is an accurate reflection of life in the 30s: if one loves the show, it's not because it tells us all about the way we were. It offers us, obviously, the way we would like to have been.<sup>64</sup>

Shales' commentary refrained from condemning *Happy Days*' historical inaccuracy, but this was because he had minimal expectations of historical accuracy from the medium more generally. His reference to *The Waltons* was also instructive. While both *Happy Days* and *The Waltons* referenced an idealized past, the former was considered repetitious, while *The Waltons* tended to be viewed on its own terms, as if it was the only program of its kind. Shales was interested in the wider implications of *Happy Days*, why its brand of nostalgia was able to make it to air at that historical moment. Notwithstanding, he, too, eschewed an explicit critique of the program: its characters, plotting, jokes.

For a variety of reasons, critics approached *Happy Days* through nostalgia rather than authenticity, as they had with *The Waltons*, and the term "nostalgia" carried with it the negative connotation of "escapism." One reason for the shift in terminology may have been generic—as a half-hour sitcom, *Happy Days* not only had less time to develop character but also prioritized comedic, situation-based plotting. Nostalgia helped advance the comedic ends of the show for the very fact that the program did not replicate an authentic 1950s worldview—it was the disjuncture between the reality of the 1950s and the nostalgic representation on the program that

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<sup>64</sup> Tom Shales, "Beginning of Nostalgic Kick," *Washington Post*, January 15 1974.

provided some of the humor.<sup>65</sup> The program was funny because of its inaccuracy. As critics described it, “escapism” was a negative value that reduced audience members to passive receivers rather than actively engaged participants in a program’s narrative. For example, to understand the ratings of *Happy Days*, *Variety*’s Bob Knight suggested that the program offered audiences relief from the economic and political hardships of the 1970s. Escapism also seemed to critics the complete opposite trend to the relevancy movement in the first half of the decade. *Variety* commented, “have the abrasive doses of real life reality epitomized by the continuing Watergate mess and the current energy crisis somehow blunted viewer appetites for realistic TV content?”<sup>66</sup> Critics therefore viewed audience enjoyment of *Happy Days* as a retreat from a troubled reality, and as a retreat from programs that explored the contemporary moment.

After its so-so first (half) season in 1974, ABC successfully boosted *Happy Days*’ ratings by shifting the program from a one-camera to a three-camera set up, adding a live audience, and enhancing the role of Fonzie, who seemed an audience favorite. The show’s dependence on the “hood with a heart of gold” character only increased with each subsequent season.<sup>67</sup> Relating that the new emphasis on Fonzie within *Happy Days* had increased the program’s ratings 25%, Gary Deeb attributed qualified praise of the programming mastermind behind the program, Fred Silverman: “Please understand: Few of Silverman’s key decisions will win him Peabody

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<sup>65</sup> Its comedic aims did not prevent critics like Lawrence Laurent from critiquing the program’s lack of historical accuracy, yet when Laurent complained that the program failed to present the complexity of the 1950s—the U.S. involvement in Korea, for example—he dramatically missed the point of the show’s intended humor. Lawrence Laurent, “Happy Days Turns Back Clock to the 1950s,” *Washington Post*, February 24 1974.

<sup>66</sup> Bob Knight, “Escapism as TV’s 2d Season Trend,” *Variety*, February 6 1974.

<sup>67</sup> In the program’s third season, starting in 1976, the show featured a new opening credit sequence, with a new song and a clear indication that Fonzie was now the star of the show—he is the first and last character viewed in the credits.

Awards, much less commendations from this column.”<sup>68</sup> Deeb reported the rising ratings for *Happy Days* because he understood that increased ratings translated to increased advertising rates and revenue, but he was quick to point out that he did not admire the network’s strategy. Similarly suspicious of the implications of the prominence of the Fonzie character, the *New York Times*’ O’Connor attributed the programming shifts to market research: “The programming-research conclusion: Working-class white ethnic is big again.”<sup>69</sup> As exemplified here, ABC’s successful parlay of the charm of Fonzie to ratings victory annoyed critics because the network’s blatant reframing of the program around a gimmicky character was evidence not only of the network’s pandering to an audience but also of the naiveté of the audience that fell for it.

*Happy Days*’ third season, the one in which Fonzie became the focus of the program, also coincided with the premiere of its first spin-off, *Laverne & Shirley* [L&S]. L&S not only rode to the top of the ratings with tremendous speed, but it also traveled from development to the screen in less than one year, a miraculous rate for a production process that typically took no fewer than eighteen months. After the first appearance of characters Laverne and Shirley on *Happy Days* in November 1975, ABC programming chief Fred Silverman ordered a 10-minute pilot and then raced the program to the air to premiere midseason on January 27, 1976. The first episode of L&S earned the highest ratings for a midseason premiere in ten years, with a 49 share and a rating of 35.1.<sup>70</sup> The show hit number one only one month later, and it pulled *Happy Days* into the top ten with it. The *Chicago Tribune* reported the program’s record numbers and featured the female leads on the cover of *TV Week* three days later. Two weeks after that, ABC had held the ratings lead among the three networks for five weeks straight. In February of 1977, one year after

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<sup>68</sup> Gary Deeb, "WGN Alumnus Gets Credit for ABC's Soaring Ratings," *Chicago Tribune*, February 23 1976.

<sup>69</sup> John J. O'Connor, "Laverne & Shirley, Spinoff with Surprise," *New York Times*, January 27 1976.

<sup>70</sup> George Maksian, "A Hair-Raising Story of Success," *Chicago Tribune*, April 22 1976. "ABC Again Tops Ratings," *Variety*, February 4 1976.

L&S premiered, Gary Deeb predicted that CBS would be forced to hand its network top spot crown to ABC, the former also-ran. L&S was a genuine phenomenon.

Perhaps even more interesting for this study, L&S received much warmer reviews than did *Happy Days*, despite being obviously more derivative (as a direct spin-off in a decade full of spin-offs). John J. O'Connor reviewed the show in the *New York Times*, admiring the charisma of the female leads, "The series is playing the old, old game of sassy brashness devastating inhibited propriety."<sup>71</sup> Cecil Smith, who hated *Happy Days* from the outset, calling it an "awful hunk of nostalgic claptrap," considered L&S rather harmless. Not a rave, but also not a pan, he chided, "it's all rather juvenile and silly and mildly funny. But the same could be said of *Happy Days*, which is an ABC stalwart."<sup>72</sup> With this tepid recommendation, Smith and his TV reporting counterpart, Lee Margulies, watched L&S race up the ratings with an apparent bemusement. Both wrote articles trying to understand the success. Interviewing the program's leads, Penny Marshall and Cindy Williams, Smith asked them for their opinion about why the show was so popular. Marshall responded that the program was fun. Williams offered a more sophisticated answer, claiming that the program dealt with a time of innocence in an age of anxiety.<sup>73</sup> Considering this program within a broader historical context of recession, the tragedy of Vietnam, and a general shift in societal mores, Williams asked, *was* it surprising that audiences responded to a "fun" show?

When Lee Margulies examined the program's popularity, he cited industrial factors as key to L&S's popularity, including weak competition (from the soon canceled *Tony Orlando and Dawn Rainbow Hour* on CBS and *Baa Baa Black Sheep* on NBC). Yet he also posited the

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<sup>71</sup> O'Connor, "Laverne & Shirley, Spinoff with Surprise."

<sup>72</sup> Cecil Smith, "ABC Spinoff Debuts Tonight," *Los Angeles Times*, January 27 1976.

<sup>73</sup> Cecil Smith, "'Laverne & Shirley': A Return to the Age of Innocence," *Los Angeles Times*, May 30 1976.

importance of the audience's embrace of the program's comforting nostalgia: "It was a time of innocence, of simplicity...and audiences welcome that escape from their anxiety about the problems of the day."<sup>74</sup> Critics discussing L&S echoed many of the sentiments offered when *Happy Days* premiered, yet here their tone had shifted from one of condescension regarding *Happy Days* to one of playful acquiescence.

ABC became the #1 network but continued to suffer from an inferiority complex, something reinforced by critics unhappy with ABC's method of achievement—mass appeal. Gary Deeb noted, "Like so many other members of the nouveau riche, ABC lacks two very important virtues: dignity and class...to get respect, you have to be respectable. And so, its dazzling ratings notwithstanding, ABC continues to be treated with its rightful air of contempt by discriminating viewers and certain segments of the press."<sup>75</sup> The phrase "discriminating viewers" was common in critical discourse and it drew a sharp line between the critics, their like-minded readers and the "other" of the mass audience. As critics contextualized the popularity of *Happy Days* and *Laverne & Shirley* within the broader ambitions of ABC, their disdain for the network's populist strategy and the programs contained therein created a divide between critic and audience.

Deeb initially praised *Happy Days*, but as his view of the show darkened in later years, he blamed programs like *Happy Days* for the overall weakening of the programming landscape. For example, when the producers of ABC's *The Tony Randall Show* reportedly refused to add a Fonzie-like character, the show was canceled. This sent Deeb into a tirade about the "pure pap" of a Fonzie-focused *Happy Days*.<sup>76</sup> Similarly, while he awaited the results of a ratings battle in

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<sup>74</sup> Lee Margulies. "ABC's Tuesday Night Nostalgia," *Los Angeles Times*, 7 December 1976, F17.

<sup>75</sup> Gary Deeb, "High Ratings Can't Quench ABC's Thirst for Respect," *Chicago Tribune*, June 24 1977.

<sup>76</sup> Gary Deeb, "Ironically, 'happy days' May Await the Tony Randall Show After All," *Chicago Tribune*, July 15 1977.

1977 between two other shows, ABC's *Soap* and CBS's MTM-produced *The Betty White Show*, Deeb discussed the monumental effect of the ratings report: "thus, viewers are faced with a clear-cut choice...if the [Betty] White show flops and *Soap* makes it big, it could mark the end of the 'golden age of TV comedy.'" <sup>77</sup> *Soap* and the Marshall series may have been successful in terms of ratings, but according to Deeb, they threatened the long-term health and value of television. With stakes this high, it was no wonder critics turned on the Fonz—or rather, they turned on his fans.

Deeb was not alone in his increased anxiety about the ramifications of ABC's successful lowest-common-denominator programming strategy—particularly worrying that high ratings data meant the audience was happy with the pap the ABC was delivering. Writing in the year L&S hit the airwaves, Tom Shales, too, expressed concern about the increasing size of the television audience: "Could this possibly mean people are happy with most of the new things they have seen on TV? Looking back on the season past, it seems incredible." <sup>78</sup> Gary Deeb, discussing the popularity of ABC shows, intoned, "does that tell us something we don't want to admit" about the American audience, i.e. that they will indeed buy pig sweat if it's pink and pretty? <sup>79</sup> Sander Vanocur, a former news executive who spent a few years working as the head of the TV department at *The Washington Post*, spent an entire evening trying to understand ABC programming wins and later chronicled his experience in the *Post*:

After looking at the national Nielsen ratings last Tuesday, I went home determined to make yet another effort to try and understand the appeal of *Happy Days* and *Laverne &*

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<sup>77</sup> Gary Deeb, "Crass or Class: It's the Viewers' Choice," *Chicago Tribune*, September 7 1977.

<sup>78</sup> It is worth noting that part of Shales' ire stems from the failure of *Beacon Hill*, a program he found innovative, despite the fact that it was an americanization of the British *Upstairs, Downstairs*. Tom Shales, "Summing Up a Season: Beyond the Malaise of the TV Viewer," *Washington Post*, March 14 1976.

<sup>79</sup> Deeb, "Crass or Class: It's the Viewers' Choice."

*Shirley*. For one hour, bolt upright in an easy chair, I did my best. I tried very hard... When the hour had ended---when I reflected in a demi-catatonic state that I had just been watching America's two most popular situation comedies—I made two important decisions in the interests of mental health. I poured myself a large whiskey and switched to *M\*A\*S\*H* on CBS.<sup>80</sup>

Vanocur's comment was tongue-in-cheek, but the gap between critical and audience reception points to larger issues of taste, education, and value. Of course, Vanocur was never going to like *Happy Days*—he approached *Happy Days* appreciation as something that required work, when in fact trying hard defeated the purpose of a show meant to encourage relaxation and ease. Vanocur could not “get” the success of programs that he did not know how to enjoy.

Vanocur's experiment revealed far more about his own program expectations and biases than it did about the audience who enjoyed *Happy Days*. The implicit assumption that his viewing strategies could or should fit within broader viewing patterns belied the status of his position as a critic and condemned those who enjoyed the program to “demi-catatonia.” To be clear, I'm not merely documenting legitimating discourses. I also want to understand the various ways critics explained away their own lack of pleasure in particular programs by condemning the audience they didn't understand. Rather than serve as an advocate for viewers, critics too often reinforced the negative portrait of viewers perpetuated by the mass culture critique and endorsed the way ratings discourse transformed audience measurement data into currency.

As critics reacted with some alarm to the increasing panoply of “juvenile” programs powering ABC's ratings, from *Three's Company* to *Love Boat*, the network fought back, in what

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<sup>80</sup> Sander Vanocur, “The ‘Family’ Hour as ‘Happy’ Hour,” *Washington Post*, October 10 1976.



became a battle about the intellect of the American audience.<sup>81</sup> ABC demanded respect while its competitors and critics repeatedly derided its programs, and by association, its audience. This discourse revealed that TV viewers were empty signifiers, imagined less as “actual” viewers and more as barbs to be employed in a fight between critics and industry employees. ABC President Fred Pierce, angry about the lack of respect accorded to his network, blamed critics for ABC’s low cultural status. Gary Deeb reported that Pierce held a series of closed-door meetings in 1977, during which time he instructed staff to refuse to talk to the press and to organize a “truth squad” to evaluate media bias. Deeb also reported the critiques of ABC offered by other network presidents, including NBC’s Paul Klein, who said ABC won “by programming for kids and dummies.”<sup>82</sup> With critics on one end and the ABC network executives on the other, the audience became the rope across which they played tug of war about the relative value of ABC’s programs.

One individual, Fred Silverman, stood at the center of these debates, representing all that seemed wrong to critics about ABC’s rise in the ratings. Silverman, the scheduling wunderkind who wrote a Master’s thesis on ABC’s scheduling strategies in the 1950s, seemed larger than life in journalistic discourse—he was alternately described as a genius, a genuine lover of television, a beneficiary of luck and happenstance, and the bane of quality television who patronized the audience. In response to his detractors, Silverman warned that a critique of himself equaled a critique of the audience. Silverman defended his record at ABC through a common trope—the “customer is always right” ideology that purported Nielsen ratings reflected actual viewers and delivered an accurate indication of program reception. *Variety* quoted Silverman in 1977 at a

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<sup>81</sup> Despite the fact that critics knew the Nielsen audience sample fell victim to statistical errors for a variety of reasons, their elision of the Nielsen audience with the wider American public makes critics complicit with industrial inaccuracy and also with a Frankfurt School-style condemnation of any viewers not sharing their own preferences.

<sup>82</sup> Deeb, “Crass or Class: It’s the Viewers’ Choice.”

meeting of the Hollywood Radio and Television Society confronting critics, “I wish a few critics would stop putting down millions of people with whom they obviously disagree night after night, season after season. What makes (them) right and 100-million Americans wrong?”<sup>83</sup> This savvy attack reinforced the legitimacy of the ratings discourse advanced by the industry while also inserting that discourse as a wedge between critics and the audience. By avoiding complicating factors like a consideration of limited programming outlets and the various reasons some shows reached the airwaves and others died in development, Silverman created an account in which critics who panned a successful show were one opinion among millions, the minority voice in a system that accurately accounted for viewer preferences through ratings.

In the *New York Times*, O’Connor quoted from this *Variety* piece about Silverman in some length, then attempted to undermine Silverman’s attack with this accusation: “This, ladies and gentlemen, is an almost classic case of bruised ego and distorted vision.” O’Connor’s reference to his readers as ladies and gentlemen in a discussion of the ABC audience implied that his readers were not only *not* the audience referenced by Silverman, but also not the real subject of the conversation. O’Connor tried to transfer the focus of Silverman’s programming strategies from ABC’s audience to the purview of the critic. O’Connor defended his own work and that of his peers: “No television critic could afford for a moment to despise popular entertainment and, at the same time, no television critic can be expected to sacrifice qualitative judgments to the quantity of audience ratings.”<sup>84</sup> Both statements were valid, according to O’Connor, and the sum of their parts was that ABC programs were not quality. Throughout these debates viewers were silenced, by both critics and the industry, employed as a tool in a larger fight about the purpose and potential of television.

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<sup>83</sup> "Fred Silverman to Critics: Look At The Ratings," *Variety*, November 9 1977.

<sup>84</sup> O’Connor, "Catching Up, Taking Notice, and Gaining Perspective."

In some ways, Silverman was unique among executives because he genuinely liked television. To O'Connor, Silverman's explicit alliance with the TV audience damned him most. As explained by O'Connor:

Mr. Silverman has the invaluable asset of really liking television. He...actually watches programs, a practice that most other executives assiduously avoid, to their own and the public's detriment. And Mr. Silverman is interested in bringing quality to his stable of adolescent series [i.e. O'Connor notes that Silverman raided MTM's staff for production workers]...for the polish of an occasional 'quality' special or movie, evidently, they will toil in the 'lowest common denominator' factory of weekly series.<sup>85</sup>

O'Connor's statement here was rather remarkable for its praise. He not only associated Silverman with a desire to produce quality programming, something Silverman's own MA thesis denied,<sup>86</sup> but he also credited Silverman with a savvy manipulation of the needs of commercial television—high ratings to generate high ad revenue—in order to produce a variety of program types.<sup>87</sup>

If this makes it seem like O'Connor admired Silverman, I should be very clear that he did not. O'Connor noted, "Television observers had long contended that most programming was designed for 12-year-olds. ABC appears to have brought that age target down to about 9, or perhaps even 8."<sup>88</sup> The explicit connection between Silverman and the audience—that he liked the programs his ABC audience loved—exposed him as sharing the mentality of the 9-year-olds

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<sup>85</sup> John J. O'Connor, "How ABC Got to the Top," *New York Times*, October 19 1977.

<sup>86</sup> Quote from Silverman's MA Thesis, "Television critics and pasteboard programmers have all the answers (on paper) though they fail to realize that network television is basically a business with profit and loss columns, stockholders' meetings and annual reports." Reported in Jeff Greenfield, "The Silverman Strategy: How Fred Silverman is Helping ABC Get Over Its Inferiority Complex," *New York Times*, March 7 1976.

<sup>87</sup> O'Connor, "How ABC Got to the Top."

<sup>88</sup> Ibid.

for whom ABC programmed. Considering other factors in ABC's success, O'Connor noted how the programming whiz filled ABC's exclusive coverage of the 1975 Winter and 1976 Summer Olympics with spot ads for their shows, bringing ABC an audience that was "undoubtedly younger and probably more 'blue collar' than, say, audiences for CBS's 'classier' series."<sup>89</sup> O'Connor linked the programs of ABC with a working-class audience, one that he presented as distinct from his readers. Due to its absolute mediocrity and its conspicuous catering to a denigrated audience, critics such as O'Connor and Deeb stood horrified as they watched *Happy Days* birth years of similarly light entertainment, supplanting the aging "relevant" programs such as *All in the Family* and the MTM-produced programs. This was a winning formula with audiences for ABC, but critics viewed with disdain both ABC and its audience.

The example of *Happy Days* highlights that in many formulations of evaluative criteria, critics subtly commented upon the values of television and its audience. This was most evident when critics considered "popular" programs that offered wide appeal but little innovation or daring content. Overlooking the simple justification for the popularity of *Happy Days*—audiences found it funny—critics produced complicated examinations of the program's historical antecedents and accuracy. Their work revealed more about themselves than it did about the audiences they purportedly addressed. Most problematic, however, was critics' unconscious construction of the mass audience as passive, unknowing, and juvenile. In their own inability to connect with popular programs like *Happy Days*, critics presumed it was the audience at fault rather than their own evaluative criteria. In the next section about NBC miniseries *Holocaust*, we will again see a divide between critics and their readers. Most striking in the *Holocaust* example will be the way critics' viewing practices distinguished and divided them from the audience, preventing their early reviews from addressing the juxtaposition of the miniseries' content from

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<sup>89</sup> Ibid.

the interspersed advertisements. Furthermore, *Holocaust* inspired deeper conversations among critics about the ultimate value and meaning of television. As deeply invested stakeholders in the medium of television, critics saw in *Holocaust* both the best and the worst that TV could offer.

### 2.3 Holocaust: *Selling Products and Tragedy*

“[*Holocaust*] was a great shared experience for the viewing nation the way *Roots*, another triumphant mediocrity, was last year” ~Tom Shales, *The Washington Post*<sup>90</sup>

NBC struggled in second place for much of the 1960s and 70s. At times, it waged a noble battle against long-reigning CBS, as during the 1968-1969 Operation 100 campaign, a pledge by CBS programmer Mike Dann to make up for his network CBS’s lagging ratings.<sup>91</sup> Though NBC continually failed to win these ratings battles, one of the network’s consistent weapons was the television special, one-off programs (often Hollywood films) that pre-empted regularly scheduled series. Specials tended to attract strong ratings, and though they helped NBC maintain its second place status, they did not often make up for the lack of strength of its new and continuing series. In the second half of the 1970s, NBC packaged the special as “The Big Event,” a term that referred more to its marketing prowess than to programming innovation. Nonetheless, this campaign did help NBC promote particular movies.<sup>92</sup> As *Variety* noted, the title “Big Event” included such longstanding television events as the premiere of a Hollywood blockbuster or sporting events like the World Series, so the moniker was rather broadly applied. Still, the branding of their Sunday night specials helped raise NBC’s profile: “the ‘Event’

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<sup>90</sup> Tom Shales, "The Biggest Arena of All," *Washington Post*, April 26 1978.

<sup>91</sup> Les Brown’s detailed discussion of Dann’s efforts with Operation 100 is a must read. Les Brown, *Televi\$ion: The Business Behind the Box* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1971).

<sup>92</sup> "Longform Eclipses Sitcom As Program Patterns Alter."

designation has worked as a lightning rod for publicity and curiosity for NBC on the heavy sets-in-use Sunday night, giving the web an aura of ingeniousness that was sorely needed.”<sup>93</sup>

Moreover, the “Big” part of the moniker reinforced that NBC was a network willing to expend a good deal of money to provide audiences with quality programming—employing “quality” as an economic term. *Holocaust* fit into NBC’s larger strategy of depending upon special events to boost its ratings despite its weak series lineup.

*Holocaust* also happened to exploit a genuine innovation in programming that arrived first on ABC in 1975 when *Rich Man, Poor Man* found success as three, continuous, four-hour original films during the ’75-’76 season. Thus, the miniseries was born.<sup>94</sup> This new format brought long-form original film productions to the television airwaves, and NBC’s Big Event concept was the perfect marketing vehicle for the miniseries. Not all miniseries were equal, though. NBC’s first effort to parlay the miniseries to ratings success failed dramatically, particularly when compared with ABC’s *Roots*, which became a genuine phenomenon. With its share of the audience ranging from 30.8 to a high of 39.1, *Roots*, based on a novel about a multi-generational story of slaves and their descendants, demolished the competition.<sup>95</sup> That its success was a huge surprise to all (confirmed by the fact that ABC had undersold its advertising spots) helped launch *Roots* into the lore of TV programming history.

From the perspective of NBC, *Roots* was a boon and a bane, showing the potential of the miniseries but making their own attempt at miniseries magic, *King*, a more pronounced failure.

*King*, based on the life of Martin Luther King, Jr., flopped in February 1978, earning a pathetic

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<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

<sup>94</sup> Trying to identify the origins of any programming trend is difficult since it depends on how narrowly one defines the limits of that genre. For example, a wire piece originating from Los Angeles and published in the *Chicago Tribune* agrees that ABC invented the miniseries, but dates it to a 1974 production called *QB VII*. Aljean Harmetz, “Networks Take Some Big Chances with Mini-Series,” *Chicago Tribune*, April 24 1978.

<sup>95</sup> Bob Knight, “‘Roots’ Remakes TV World in 8 Nights,” *Variety*, February 2 1977.

18 share against a two-year-old Burt Reynolds movie called *Gator*.<sup>96</sup> The movie became an embarrassment for NBC, but not everyone found it lacking. In his original review of *King*, John J. O'Connor of the *New York Times* offered cautious praise. He predicted controversy over the portrait of King in this "docu-drama," noting some liberties taken with historical details in the name of dramatic impact. Nevertheless, O'Connor admired Paul Winfield's performance as Dr. King and ultimately determined that the film honored King's important place within American history.<sup>97</sup> After the miniseries bombed, though, O'Connor's tone became more strident as he investigated why audiences failed to turn in. "Needless to say, the ratings have nothing to do with quality," O'Connor wrote, and then added, "Of course, the mass audience may be in no mood for significance these days. At times, it can seem downright hostile to quality." O'Connor, not the audience, might be seen as the hostile one, with his unjustified modifiers ("of course" and "needless to say") and his attack on the audience's powers of judgment. There is more than can be written about *King* and critical reception like O'Connor's, but what I'd like to emphasize here is that O'Connor wrote a middling review prior to the show's broadcast and then blamed the audience for failing to recognize the program's presumed self-evident quality. At the conclusion of his follow-up piece, O'Connor surmised that the audience likely did not want to be depressed by television.

*Holocaust* became NBC's next Big Event, following the sublime success of *Roots* and the profound failure of *King*. Ordered by Paul Klein years before, when *Roots* was itself in the early stages of development, *Holocaust* was similar to *King* in its examination of a historically oppressed group, its docu-drama form, and its focus on a troubled moment in global history.

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<sup>96</sup> "'Gator' Chews up 'King' as Big Event Flops," *Variety*, February 15 1978. For an ongoing TV series, a 28 share was the absolute minimum standard for survival into another season. *King* was a special event, so expectations were even higher.

<sup>97</sup> John J. O'Connor, "6-Hour King, Drama of Civil Rights Drive," *New York Times*, February 9 1978.

Unlike *King*, *Holocaust* became a smash success, second only to *Roots* in its landmark ratings. Moreover, *Holocaust* “had legs,” in industry parlance, earning record rates in the global syndication market, and then setting ratings records in many other countries.<sup>98</sup> This section focuses on the program’s domestic, U.S. reception among critics and journalists. From the perspective of critics, *Holocaust* was a test of the audience—most viewed the film as a gauge of audience desire for quality. The film also inspired deeper conversations about the type of content conducive to television as a commercial medium. *Holocaust* was a product of contradictions: a fictional narrative about a real historical event, a serious historical work that employed melodramatic techniques instead of documentary style, and a commercial product that also had pretensions to wider cultural significance. Critics’ debate about *Holocaust* was not only impassioned but also layered.

Critics were somewhat divided in their reviews of *Holocaust* but they were even more divided in terms of the criteria by which they evaluated it. Tom Shales called it “the most powerful film ever made for television” because he wanted television content to be “grim, provocative and emotionally demanding.”<sup>99</sup> Gary Deeb loved the film, noting its excellence in terms of its intimate portrayals of two families and its unabashed depiction of evil: “*Holocaust* serves a dual purpose: It’s an electrifying story of two families on opposite sides of the Nazi madness; it’s also a mesmerizing chronicle of mankind at its worst.”<sup>100</sup> For Deeb, it was a story well told. Howard Rosenberg praised the film from the perspective of its format (multi-day miniseries): “It also has been the crème de la crème of its genre, a commercial TV drama of immense scope able to sustain its texture, intensity and quality throughout its multi-evening

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<sup>98</sup> My favorite anecdote about *Holocaust*’s global reception was that it brought Spain, a country living in relative isolation under a fascist regime, its first news that the Holocaust happened.

<sup>99</sup> Tom Shales, “Holocaust’s Pain and Power,” *Washington Post*, April 12 1978.

<sup>100</sup> Gary Deeb, “NBC’s ‘Holocaust’ is a Frightening but Enlightening View of History,” *Chicago Tribune*, April 13 1978.



existence.”<sup>101</sup> Rosenberg admired the program’s consistency, and his mention that the program was a “commercial” venture perhaps nodded to his assumption that commercial television rarely maintained quality in duration. With the most negative review, John J. O’Connor suggested that a fictional film could not achieve the same sense of truth and humility as a documentary, citing the film as a “plodding, realist drama.”<sup>102</sup> As the conversation developed, though, the critics issued a series of follow-up pieces that moved beyond their original evaluative criteria to probe *Holocaust* as a symbol for the wider hopes and fears about television’s role in culture and about the preferences of its audience.

As with discussions about *Happy Days* and *The Waltons*, authenticity became a weapon in the battle over *Holocaust*’s value and meaning. In fact, authenticity became the most significant criteria by which *Holocaust* would be judged, a criteria examined even during the production process. When *Variety* discussed the filming of *Holocaust*, it accorded with the producer’s clear qualification that the program bill itself as a drama, not a docu-drama. This generic distinction was partly meant to account for the fact that the families presented in *Holocaust* were all fictional rather than based on actual victims of the systemic slaughter during World War II. This semantic wordplay highlighted producer Herb Brokin’s awareness that historical accuracy would become a matter of contention in the film’s reception. By downplaying the documentary element implied in “docu-drama,” Brokin attempted to foreclose one line of critique. Despite *Holocaust*’s avoidance of any claim to documentary, *Variety* connected the film’s appeal to a discourse of authenticity: “both families [featured in *Holocaust*] are fictional,

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<sup>101</sup> Howard Rosenberg, "'Holocaust'—Big Impact on Small Screen," *Los Angeles Times*, April 19 1978.

<sup>102</sup> O’Connor’s review also included another frequent critique of the program—its employment of melodramatic tropes. The term used to convey this aspect of the film was an accusation of the film being “soap opera.” Space has not allowed me to dig deeper into this generic, gendered discourse of evaluation.

but the reality is not.”<sup>103</sup> The piece continued, noting that the production was filming in West Berlin near the Warsaw Ghetto, employing 100 local extras, lending it a deeper resonance through proximity to sites of the Holocaust.<sup>104</sup> Producer Brodtkin’s disavowal notwithstanding, authenticity remained a chief measure against which the film would be judged.

One element of authenticity, namely concentration camps and gas chambers, appeared several times in conversations about the film, even before its airing. These references documented the lengths to which the film attempted verisimilitude, even while producers billed it as a drama rather than a docu-drama.<sup>105</sup> *Variety* referenced such authentic locations as essential for the film’s efforts: “shooting was sometimes very difficult—as in a gas chamber or a rock quarry which are both original and chilling even to contemplate working in. But this adds more weight and human depth to a drama that affects mankind just as much today as it did then.”<sup>106</sup> A less graceful and sensitive reference appeared in the only actor profile I found that preceded the film’s airing.<sup>107</sup> In an interview with James Woods, an up-and coming actor at the time, Cecil Smith ended the piece with this incredibly strange comment by Woods: “We had to build three new ovens. We were going to fire up the old ovens, the crematoria for the first time in 45 years. Then someone mentioned: ‘These are dedicated graves.’ We built new ovens....” The piece literally trails off with ellipses to indicate a host of implications, intentions, and possible interpretations. The quote from Woods unintentionally reminded readers that the figures involved in the story may have had no personal connection to the tragedy of the Holocaust.

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<sup>103</sup> “‘Holocaust’ Miniseries Shoots at Culprit’s Locale—In Germany,” *Variety*, November 23 1977.

<sup>104</sup> The piece also notes that original plans to shoot in Yugoslavia and Hungary in locations nearer to the historical locations within Poland and Czechoslovakia fell through.

<sup>105</sup> This disavowal derived in part from the legacy of *King*, which also had to defend its portrait of the man, Martin Luther King, Jr.

<sup>106</sup> “‘Holocaust’ Miniseries Shoots at Culprit’s Locale—In Germany.”

<sup>107</sup> Perhaps due to the harsh subject matter of the film and its need to convey a sense of authority, the newspapers do not feature many actor profiles of stars in *Holocaust*.

Without that personal connection, the cast and crew had to be cautioned that thousands of humans died in these “location” settings. Authenticity, while a marker of distinction, also became easily exposed as artifice when constructed poorly. While producers were aware of their responsibility to present a certain verisimilitude with the historical past, the press reports conveyed the delicate balance cast members and producers had to maintain between their fictional characters but real-life setting.

*Holocaust* did not find its ratings success without inspiring controversy, and the debate about the film’s methods reached far beyond critical discourse, becoming part of a national conversation among renowned figures, including Holocaust survivor and author, Elie Wiesel. Because *Holocaust* incited such heated conversations about the lines between truth and fiction, understanding how critics reacted to the broader cultural debate sheds light on the limits of televisual content and artistic constraints. In particular, critical discussions of *Holocaust* led to deeper questions about the potential of television, as a commercial medium, to address a serious subject like the mass murder of millions during World War II. The stakes for this debate, therefore, were remarkably high, potentially identifying inherent weaknesses in the possibilities for the medium during the late 1970s by exposing critics’ own narrow set of expectations for televisual “success.”

In addition to publishing separate articles on the study guides and events organized by religious groups, the *New York Times* featured a high-profile debate between Holocaust survivor and author Elie Wiesel and *Holocaust* screenwriter Gerald Green.<sup>108</sup> Interspersed throughout were separate columns by *Times* critic John J. O’Connor. Here is the order of the conversation.

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<sup>108</sup> Nervous about how Jewish audiences would respond to the film, producers offered preview opportunities for rabbis, Jewish groups, and teachers (in addition to the usual previews offered for critics), and journalists often interviewed these figures for their reactions. Producers also provided study guides for educators and synagogues that sought to initiate a dialogue in tandem with viewing the series.

O'Connor reviewed *Holocaust* on April 14, and Wiesel then offered his reflections on the film on April 16, the day the program's first episode premiered nationally. Both O'Connor and Wiesel worked from preview versions of the film, those versions that did not contain advertisements, though showings did pause at the moments when a commercial break would be placed. In this chronology, O'Connor had the first word on the film, and then Wiesel enjoyed the privilege of adding his perspective before the audience had viewed the film. O'Connor followed up with a second piece about *Holocaust* on April 20, and this time he focused on the debate about the advertisements aired as interstitial content throughout the film. Screenwriter Green issued a response to Wiesel on April 23, after the program had completed its four-day, consecutively aired run. Wiesel replied to Green's article on April 30, and John J. O'Connor delivered on May 7 a general commentary about the stakes for commercial television exposed by *Holocaust*, accusing the medium of "abandon[ing] all pretenses to artistic achievement."<sup>109</sup> This chronology documents that O'Connor enjoyed a privilege as the critic at the *Times* in terms of his contributions to the debate—he offered the first word and the last word on *Holocaust*.<sup>110</sup>

In his pre-review of *Holocaust*, O'Connor worried that the mix of fact and fantasy (some historical figures who participated in the *Holocaust* are included as characters in the otherwise fictional dramatization) would only become more troubling when the narrative was interrupted

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<sup>109</sup> John J. O'Connor, "If It Sells, It Must Be Good," *New York Times*, May 7 1978.

<sup>110</sup> O'Connor did not insert himself directly into the conversation between Wiesel and Green, referencing neither gentleman in his own writing. Nevertheless, readers of the Arts & Leisure section, in which all these articles were published, likely read the pieces in the order I've noted above as if they were one cumulative account of the film's success and wider cultural impact. Other participants in this conversation were readers/viewers themselves, several of whom had written letters that O'Connor published in his "TV Mailbag" column. In the column that contained the most number of letters (readers commented on the film throughout the month, and O'Connor included select letters in several Mailbag columns), reader letters were published directly alongside the official response to the debate offered by NBC Publicity Vice President, George G. Hoover. It was these letters that originally drew my attention to *Holocaust*, but space has not allowed a deeper engagement. TV critic mailbag columns deserve more attention from scholars, particularly those who study audience reception and TV criticism. "TV Mailbag: The 'Holocaust' Controversy Continues," *New York Times*, April 30 1978.

repeatedly by “inane commercials.”<sup>111</sup> His gentle pan considered the film largely through its genre—he suggested only a documentary could truly capture a recent historical tragedy such as this.<sup>112</sup> In fact, he found the fiction of the characters somewhat offensive, such that he declared himself incapable of commenting on the good performances. Yet as his comment about commercials suggested, O’Connor was concerned that the explicit taint of the commercial would reduce the film’s achievement: “to throw any of these people, real or not, into a second-rate dramatization that will be seen with interruptions for inane commercials is to enter automatically a process of diminishment.”<sup>113</sup> Summarizing his opinion about the programs, O’Connor wrote, “on balance, *Holocaust* is less a noble venture than a presumptuous venture.”<sup>114</sup> Though O’Connor had not viewed the commercials in his advanced viewing, he anticipated that the commercials would undermine any loftier purpose aspired by the film’s depiction of a horrendous moment in global history. TV, in his view, could not aspire to deliver truth due to its commercial mandate.

Elie Wiesel was also concerned that television was not a medium up to the challenge of depicting the events of the Holocaust, but he went even further by suggesting no artistic form could capture accurately the true horror of that time in history. Wiesel was not only a Holocaust survivor but also the author of *Night*, among the most famous and widely read of Holocaust memoirs, so he had experienced firsthand the challenge of capturing the Holocaust in words. In his *Times* article, featured on the front page of the Arts & Leisure section on the day *Holocaust* premiered, Wiesel struggled with the inevitable trivialization within *Holocaust*, what he called “semi-fact and semi-fiction”:

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<sup>111</sup> John J. O’Connor, “Review: Holocaust,” *New York Times*, April 14 1978.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid.

The story is gripping, the acting competent, the message compelling—and yet...And yet something is wrong with it. Something? No: everything. Untrue, offensive, cheap: as a TV production, the film is an insult to those who perished and to those who survived. In spite of its name, this ‘docu-drama’ is not about what some of us remember as the Holocaust.<sup>115</sup>

Noting that he was likely “sensitive” about the topic, Wiesel also expressed concern about the program’s inaccuracies, stereotypes, breadth, and melodrama.<sup>116</sup> Ultimately, Wiesel determined that “Auschwitz cannot be explained, nor can it be visualized,” and he expressed doubt that any artistic effort could cover the gap between experience and representation. Wiesel’s commentary was impassioned, persuasive, and self-aware. His fundamental concern was that the Holocaust was such a singular and unfathomable event that no art form could recreate it appropriately.

While Wiesel implicated all media forms in his critique of artistic depictions of Holocaust, O’Connor’s next article extended his explicit critique of television as a medium, arguing that its fundamental commercial mandate precluded serious work like *Holocaust*. Published after the concluding episode of the miniseries had aired, O’Connor framed his article as a response to the broader conversations about *Holocaust*. While he did not cite specific people who had objected to the advertisements, O’Connor nevertheless positioned himself as a television authority able to answer questions from those who had critiqued the program: “Some observers ask why NBC was not able to arrange the four evenings of *Holocaust* in the more dignified context, using fewer breaks and greater taste, of ‘institutional advertising’ a single sponsor...Generally, the giant corporations feel safer with acceptable cultural fare or toney

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<sup>115</sup> Elie Wiesel, "Trivializing the Holocaust: Semi-Fact and Semi-Fiction," *New York Times*, April 16 1978.

<sup>116</sup> The fact that the film was a melodrama, featuring soap opera elements and dramatic expressions of emotion, was also a frequent topic of conversation among critics.

imports.”<sup>117</sup> For O’Connor, television was limited by its structure and mission: “a monstrous historical fact has been put through the peculiar process that is called commercial television. In its more extreme moments, that processing proved to be almost as obscene as the holocaust itself.”<sup>118</sup> Specific examples of this “obscene” “process” listed by O’Connor included a reference in the film to gas chambers serving as “disinfecting areas,” followed by an ad for Lysol, and a scene in which Germans look at perverted photos, with a commercial break for Polaroid.<sup>119</sup> Objections to the commercials were not based solely on interruption but indeed cited the ways audiences read across the commercials, finding tonal and thematic connections between the united television text of program, commercials, promotions and any other inserted messages contained within the nine and a half hour run of *Holocaust*.

There are two odd absences in O’Connor’s piece. First, he kept his focus closely on the program *Holocaust*, yet the implications of his critique constructed a profound limitation for the artistic aspirations of television. In this piece, he did not examine what other types of programs may have provoked similar outrage, nor did he contemplate how future television programs could or should respond to this controversy. Second, O’Connor posited that by inviting rabbis and other civil representatives to view a preview that aired without commercials, NBC limited their ability to critique more fully the program: “In a master stroke of public relations, many religious groups, Jewish and non-Jewish, were recruited to participate in related ‘educational’ projects, effectively endorsing a program they hadn’t seen and thus reducing the possibilities for their being critical.” Strikingly, O’Connor did not consider the implication of this statement for critics, who also viewed a preview copy without commercials. In fact, critics regularly viewed

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<sup>117</sup> John J. O’Connor, “NBC Holocaust, Art vs. Mammon,” *New York Times*, April 20 1978.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid.

<sup>119</sup> Interestingly, O’Connor’s comments did not examine how advertisers may themselves have felt uncomfortable with these juxtapositions (does Lysol want to be associated with mass murder?).

programs in a widely differing context than their readers—in screening rooms at their office or the local television stations, with copies that did not replicate exactly the program as it would air on TV. Paraphrasing O'Connor's line of argument, the conventions of their privileged program consumption reduced the ability of critics to be critical of the full program experience.

*Holocaust* highlighted fundamental concerns about how television packaged its programs and viewers for the economic benefit of its advertising clients, and O'Connor asserted the authority of his position to interrogate these concerns. He did not, however, probe deeper into the implications that critics were consistently compromised by their privileged industrial position.

*Holocaust's* screenwriter Gerald Green replied to Wiesel's article with a less than elegant defense of his work after the miniseries had already ended its consecutive four-night run, and after O'Connor's harsh indictment of television above. Published in the *New York Times* a week after Wiesel's piece, Gerald Green acknowledged particular points in Wiesel's article, including the fact that certain Jewish religious rituals were presented inaccurately, and he offered a fair amount of deference to Wiesel's experiential knowledge. As the article progressed, though, Green's tone became sharper and concluded with an accusation that Wiesel was overly concerned with his own commercial interests: "Mr. Wiesel need not be appalled nor have any fears. The viewing of *Holocaust* will create a surge of new interest in the subject. More of Elie Wiesel's books will be sold than ever."<sup>120</sup> Green's reference to Wiesel's commercial interests was crass, but it also pointed to a larger preoccupation with the commercial mandate of American television. Among the critiques of the program, this was the hardest to counter. When accused of inaccuracy, Green could reference his detailed research. When accused of inauthenticity, he could note the film's location shooting, international cast, and other efforts.

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<sup>120</sup> Gerald Green, "In Defense of 'Holocaust'," *New York Times*, April 23 1978.



Yet critiques about TV and advertising ultimately challenged the foundations upon which television was built, and apology became more difficult.<sup>121</sup>

In his last reference to *Holocaust* on May 7, O'Connor responded to suggestions that he prefered public broadcasting over commercial television.<sup>122</sup> O'Connor answered this critique, without identifying who had voiced it, by launching a series of accusations at American commercial television, including the fact that it prized ratings over quality, that it had to account for constant interruption for commercials, and that it was run by lawyers and businessmen instead of program experts. The accusation that O'Connor hated commercial television was meant, most likely, to delegitimize his authority as a critic, showing him to be unwilling to enjoy anything produced by a system he distrusted. Frustrated, O'Connor contemplated a more profound fear about television's nature: "Dealing with this problem gets to the very heart of the electronic beast and a growing awareness of its inherent limitations." In other words, when profit trumps art, is quality even possible? O'Connor's anxiety about television reached a peak of frustration in his condemnation of the way networks interpreted ratings as approbation: "Until commercial television can find another way or ways of existing, the system cannot hope to be considered with the seriousness it thinks it deserves. Box office is not enough."<sup>123</sup> This is a pretty strong accusation, with wide implications. For O'Connor, commercial television could not

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<sup>121</sup> Most every art form eventually enters into the commercial market. Painters sell their work at galleries, films charge for a ticket, books populate shelves at stores across the country. Yet the commerce at the heart of television attracts more attention from critics because there is no one-to-one relation between the producer and the audience. Instead, there is an intermediary figure, the advertiser. The viewing audience is then reduced to a set of rating figures that are exchanged for cash value in spot sales. For more on the mass culture critique, see also Theodor Adorno, *The Culture Industry: Selected Essays on Mass Culture*, ed. J.M. Bernstein (New York: Routledge, 2001); Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981); Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in *Illuminations* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1968).

<sup>122</sup> O'Connor did not name the individuals who directly criticized himself, but in a letter to the *Times* about the *Holocaust* controversy, NBC Press and Publicity Vice President George F. Hoover inquired specifically as to whether O'Connor intentionally precluded from commercial television significant fare like *Holocaust* because he wanted that to be the provenance of noncommercial television.

<sup>123</sup> O'Connor, "If It Sells, It Must Be Good."

produce serious programming, for the ads would always undermine any artistic aspirations. As a critic of the medium, O'Connor not only narrowed considerably the range of programs he could admire but also declared himself completely unable to appreciate television as the majority of Americans did.

Other television critics, too, acknowledged the complaints about how commercials impacted *Holocaust*, but for the most part, they did not frame the conversation about *Holocaust* as an examination of the disappearance of the practice of networks producing sustaining programming, aired without commercials.<sup>124</sup> The *Los Angeles Times* created a full-page feature about the film [See Figure 4], including a series of articles about the historical Holocaust and the televised program *Holocaust*. Among the items in this feature collection of articles was a historical chronology of the Holocaust, an article by Gerald Green about how he came to write the screenplay for the film, an excerpted piece by Elie Wiesel about teaching the Holocaust, and Cecil Smith's actor profile of James Woods, mentioned above. The *Los Angeles Times*, therefore, invested rather heavily in the program, contributing to the hype that surrounded it but also positioning their articles about the film among more historical pieces, including a map that listed the number of Jews murdered from each country in Europe during Hitler's systematic killing. Juxtaposed with historical artifacts, the *Times* lent their coverage of the film a deeper significance and resonance, affirming the program's authenticity. Howard Rosenberg's review of the program was published on the day the finale aired. By the time his piece appeared, O'Connor had already envisioned a negative reaction to the advertisements, and two reporters in the *Washington Post* had examined viewer reactions in detail.<sup>125</sup> Rosenberg, seemingly in

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<sup>124</sup> Public television took over this cultural practice, airing all of its programming without advertising as part of its noncommercial mandate.

<sup>125</sup> Judith Valente and Robert Meyers, "Holocaust has Deep but Mixed Effect: Holocaust Divides Viewers," *Washington Post*, April 18 1978. For this article, the journalists interviewed a number of

response to this ongoing debate about the commercials in *Holocaust*, offered his own take on the matter: “You're bound to lose a little impact when about every 10 minutes you alternate atrocities with sales pitches for dog food, toothpaste, beer, pantyhose and perfume.”<sup>126</sup> Notwithstanding the jarring ads, Rosenberg described *Holocaust* as “a jolting injection of monstrous truth into the primetimes of viewers accustomed to getting stoned on silliness and slop.”<sup>127</sup> Of all the reviews published in the publications featured in this dissertation, Rosenberg’s most fully accounts for the miniseries as an aesthetic form. He evaluated various performances and director Marvin Chomsky’s staging, finding all to be work of which to be proud. Granting the impossibility of any medium to deliver a truth so impossible to conceive as the Holocaust, Rosenberg gave the miniseries, on balance, high marks.

Gary Deeb’s review, one of the first to be published, was unabashed praise. He not only celebrated the program’s pedagogical impact but also declared that only “scoundrels” would object to the miniseries.<sup>128</sup> Deeb’s review was so positive that it barely touched the surface of the miniseries, leaving the reader with little other than platitudes. In a follow-up piece on April 26, though, Deeb revealed his stakes as a critic in the success of *Holocaust*. Commenting to those who suggested that celebrating the program’s record ratings was like trading on depictions of murder, Deeb posited that because the ratings could inspire networks to produce similarly challenging programming in the future, there was indeed a reason to celebrate.<sup>129</sup> Deeb wanted the networks to produce more serious programming, and he hoped the success of *Holocaust* would produce equally challenging work. A continuum was therefore evident in the reviews of

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viewers of *Holocaust*, and examined such responses as the impact of witnessing the brutality on the screen and the effect of the commercials.

<sup>126</sup> Rosenberg, “‘Holocaust’—Big Impact on Small Screen.”

<sup>127</sup> Ibid.

<sup>128</sup> Deeb, “NBC’s ‘Holocaust’ is a Frightening but Enlightening View of History.”

<sup>129</sup> Gary Deeb, “The Future of Quality Programming was Riding on ‘Holocaust’ Ratings,” *Chicago Tribune*, April 26 1978.

*Holocaust*—with O'Connor on one side worrying that television could not ever produce quality work, and with Deeb on the other side hoping that ratings would inspire similarly quality work. These were fundamental questions about the medium, and about how the critic should interact with it.<sup>130</sup> *Holocaust* hereby demonstrated how deeply a “popular” program inspired critics to engage with the true paradoxes of their work.

Tom Shales of the *Washington Post* wrote three separate pieces about *Holocaust*, on April 12 before the program aired, April 16 when the first episode premiered, and April 26 one week after the miniseries had concluded. His sustained analysis, like O'Connor's, documented not only how a critic's view about a long-form narrative shifted as the program unfolded but also how a critic responded to the wider conversation about the program. In his first review on April 12, Shales discussed the possible impact of the ratings for *Holocaust*—whether they would be great or dismal. He cautioned, “This is a pivotal moment for television. The ratings of *Holocaust* could affect programming decisions for years to come. Networks will study them as indicators of whether TV viewers can be lured from the usual numb escapism for something grim, provocative and emotionally demanding.”<sup>131</sup> Nowhere does Shales make an explicit plea for his readers to tune in as viewers. In fact, he often referred to viewers throughout the article with the third-person pronoun. For example, he mentioned that ABC, a network that rejected *Holocaust* some years back, had been trying to poison the press about the program by saying viewers wouldn't watch because they didn't want to be depressed. “If they don't [watch],” Shales surmised, “it's partly because ABC has been feeding them a steady diet of cotton candy ever since, and despite, the success of *Roots*.”<sup>132</sup> At the end of the piece, Shales emphasized the role Nielsen audiences

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<sup>130</sup> Public broadcasting served as a shadow over this debate about advertising, for it demonstrated how television could operate without the contributions of advertisers.

<sup>131</sup> Shales, “Holocaust's Pain and Power,” B1.

<sup>132</sup> Ibid., B5.

would play in future understandings of the film's significance: "*Holocaust* really could make a difference in television...Everyone in television will be watching next week to see how much of the nation watches this program; 1,100 families with Nielsen meters on their TV sets will in effect be casting decisive ballots on—whether TV is to get better or become even worse."<sup>133</sup> Rather than invite audiences to share his appreciation of the film, Shales instead provided an insider's view into the minds of those who worked within the television industry. He aligned himself with "everyone in television" awaiting the results, but this "everyone" did not include viewers. He also framed the ratings as a democracy, missing an opportunity to critique the system. By heightening the stakes, Shales lent the ratings even more power over the future of television.

In his next two articles, Shales toggled between praise of television's potential as a storytelling medium and a more practical examination of the medium's limits. In his second review, published on the day *Holocaust* premiered, Shales described television as an intimate medium able to tell this type of story with unusual power. He also countered many critics of *Holocaust* who had declared that only a documentary could feature the historical Holocaust without lessening the material, instead arguing that the television presentation of *Holocaust* was able to connect with audiences more emotionally than a documentary could. Shales pointed out that television had the "capability, little utilized, of making the abstract, even the unimaginable, personal and particular."<sup>134</sup> Unlike every other critic and journalist so far discussed, Shales found in *Holocaust* an expression of what was unique about television—its intimacy. Rather than approach *Holocaust* and the debate that surrounded it as an example of the limits of television,

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<sup>133</sup> Ibid.

<sup>134</sup> Tom Shales, "Holocaust: Four Nights of Television at its Most Demanding," *Washington Post*, April 16 1978.

Shales described how the program evidenced the potential of TV to be more, to serve more, to say more.

In his next piece on April 26, titled “The Biggest Arena of All,” Shales defended *Holocaust* and the medium of television further.<sup>135</sup> Shales addressed one segment of the audience directly: critics of *Holocaust*. He employed a rhetoric of democracy, equating some critics of *Holocaust* with uninformed voters, to police the legitimacy of critics of television who did not otherwise watch television:

Expatriate viewers who drop in on television only to witness a rare special event—and then find the event an enormous disappointment—are like citizens of a republic who haven’t voted in 30 years and then, upon entering the voting booth, become horrified by the caliber of the candidates. They have a right to complain but their previous abstinence makes their objections irrelevant.<sup>136</sup>

Shales did not name any names, but it seemed figures like Wiesel may have been included in his group of non-TV viewers who had not earned the right to judge. Or perhaps he was referring to those who critiqued the program’s commercials, a fact of life with the medium of television. Subsequent points in the article, however, broadened Shales’ critique to include a fellow critic like O’Connor, whose review threatened to define narrow limits for what television could achieve.

Shales’ primary concern derived from a fear that too strong a critique of *Holocaust*’s flaws might discourage the networks from airing similar programs in the future. In his discussion of the compromises necessary to package *Holocaust* for a mass audience, Shales borrowed the term “arena” from network executive Paul Klein. He stated, “*Holocaust* was designed for the

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<sup>135</sup> Shales “Arena” piece traveled the wire circuit and therefore reached a wide audience beyond his *Washington Post* readership.

<sup>136</sup> Shales, “The Biggest Arena of All,” B1.

biggest arena of all, the prime-time network television theater, and so to expect it to have the finesse, the subtleties or the beauty of a literary or motion picture ‘classic’ is unreasonable. As such, TV can be a homogenizer or a populist forum.”<sup>137</sup> Throughout this article, Shales avoided damning the audience, instead praising the fact that the ratings suggested audiences may enjoy more than “fluff.” He also celebrated that complaints about the commercials confirmed that viewers were not passive. His apology for television tried to address the medium on its own terms, noting its lacks but also celebrating its power to reach millions and to move them. Yet he also felt he needed to qualify television as unable to achieve the same levels of beauty as film. Shales seemed torn—rather than resolve the central tension aroused by the debate surrounding *Holocaust*, he instead opened it up for further conversation. As the quote that introduced this section of chapter two conveyed, Shales found *Holocaust* to be a “triumphant mediocrity,” but in so doing, he did not necessarily disparage the entire medium nor the entire viewing audience. Shales’ negotiation of *Holocaust*’s popularity led him to try to understand the program’s appeal rather than damn it.

The critics of *Holocaust* seem to have interpreted ratings data in accordance with their personal opinion about the program’s worth. O’Connor concluded that *Holocaust* did not rise above his moderate expectations for commercial television, so the high ratings meant the audience enjoyed mediocrity. Deeb loved the program and therefore celebrated that audience measurement data confirmed American viewers’ desire for more challenging work on network television. This subjective reading of the ratings was consistent with the other programs discussed in this chapter. As we saw with *The Waltons*, the show’s increasingly strong ratings meant audiences were listening to the critics who guided them toward the program. *Happy Days*’ increasingly strong ratings, however, meant audiences were choosing to support a program that

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<sup>137</sup> Ibid., B4.

critics had identified as pap. Similarly, *Holocaust* served as a sort of inkblot upon which critics expressed their deepest anxieties that television was incapable of more sophisticated and challenging programming. The work of television critics raised crucial questions about the medium's limits and its audience's preferences. Critical discussions of the imagined audience, reflected in ratings data, transformed viewers from the perspective of critics into a seemingly schizophrenic audience, at times appreciating work of value and at other times embracing the lowest common denominator program. Unable to relate fully with the data presenting viewer preferences, critics often positioned themselves in opposition to the very viewers their work was meant to address. Perhaps more than the programs that critics loved or loved to hate, it is this middle range of popular programs that inspired for critics the most difficult questions about television, its economic model, its audience, and its ambition.

#### 2.4 Conclusion

Every so often in the critical writing of the 1970s, a critic would mention a scholar who wrote about television. Whether Marshall McLuhan or Mark Poster, these references indicated how widely some theories of television had travelled within popular culture in the 1970s. The scholar who spoke most often with the critics discussed here was media historian Erik Barnouw. Cecil Smith, Howard Rosenberg, and Tom Shales cited him at various times throughout the decade. One interaction, inspired by *Holocaust*, featured Smith discussing and quoting from Barnouw's most recent work. This article exhibited the potential, often overlooked, of these types of interactions between scholar and critic. Commenting that 1978 seemed to have produced a larger outcry against tasteless commercials than in the past, Smith quoted at length from Barnouw's recent publication, *The Sponsor: Notes on a Modern Potentate*. For Barnouw, the



problem of television was not the visibility of sponsors but rather the way the system obscured the operations that produced programs, ads, and consumer culture:

Commercials have worked with success toward revision of many traditional tenets of our society...Reverence for nature has been replaced by determination to process it. Thrift has been replaced by a duty to buy. The work ethic has been replaced by the consumption ethic. Modesty has been exorcised with help from the sexual sell. Restraint of ego has lost standing.<sup>138</sup>

Barnouw's critique moved far beyond television, referencing a wider consumer culture enabled by government collusion with the powerful through acceptance of conglomeration and other industry-friendly efforts. Despite his inclusion of this relatively grave analysis of the impact of commercialization, Smith deflected Barnouw's critique through an appeal to an alternative: non-commercial television. Smith expressed hope that public television could evolve away from the fringe of the television industry to offer a stronger challenge to the presumed limits of commercial TV. The desire to place hopes for a different type of television onto a system without the same economic structure perhaps made sense at the time, but it also avoided a deeper consideration of how the commercial mandate determined types of content able to reach viewers, or at minimum, how it shaped their reception, as did the commercials for *Holocaust*.

Smith's Barnouw article concluded with another quote from Barnouw's book: "while we make our media...our media make us." The implications of this quote were far ranging, as was his use of the "we," a pronoun that included everyone—critics, scholars, and audiences—as part of the process of media (and meaning) creation. The divisions between critics and audiences, and the collusion between industry and those same critics, impeded stronger critiques of the medium, such as the one evidenced by Barnouw above. For Barnouw to be included in a newspaper article

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<sup>138</sup> Cecil Smith, "...And Now, a Word About Sponsors," *Los Angeles Times*, April 21 1978.

about television was not a small achievement, but as with other examples listed above, Smith missed an opportunity to offer a more pointed critique, in alliance with Barnouw. The quote nevertheless reminds us that critics are one member of a much wider audience.

The case studies presented here issue a caution for the various ways critics were divided and divided themselves from the readers to whom they wrote. Their most successful negotiations were with the industry about which they wrote, with critics continuing to demand the best from the programs they viewed, even as they also served a promotional and guidance function for the audience. In composing the criteria by which programs were to be evaluated, they defined the parameters within which programs were judged. Yet the element of their evaluations that was most troubling was the implicit disregard their writing often showed for the mass audience, whether that was the audience reflected in the ratings or merely their own sense of an audience not included within the idealized readers they addressed as they wrote. Because critics' writing frequently carried with it assumptions about how television should operate or should be received, they often issued a divide between themselves and the Nielsen audience. This discomfort with the tastes of the mass audience limited the appeal of critical writing and perhaps limited their ability to connect with and influence a wider audience of readers.

The critical discourse examined in the case studies above documented a tension between what the critics hoped television could be and what role they imagined the mass audience playing in supporting their desired vision for the medium. When the television industry credited critics with the saving of *The Waltons*, they obscured the role played by the audience as viewers of that program. Further, critics often served industry ends in their commentary and reportage of the program's actors and creative executives like Earl Hamner, Jr. *The Waltons* exposed how often critics engaged more directly in conversation with the TV industry than they did with their

audience of readers. From another perspective, though, critics also tended to blame the wrong party when a program did fail. Critics were anxious about the future of *The Waltons*, but they expressed this anxiety as a cynical prediction that the program would not find an audience. Rather than concentrate their critique on the fact that the TV industry would presume a 25 share (one quarter of possible viewers) was inadequate, critics instead framed the battle for *The Waltons*' survival as one based in an audience uninterested in a quality work. When *The Waltons* did find an audience, critics took the credit instead of acknowledging that their cynicism had underestimated the viewing public.

The *Happy Days* example, on the other hand, depicted a more specific divide between critics and the millions who enjoyed *Happy Days*, its spin-offs, and the other light entertainment fare ABC specialized in producing at the end of the 1970s. The criteria employed by critics to evaluate the program—an examination of how nostalgia and escapism can occlude an engagement with contemporary issues and conflicts—may have accurately reflected their own perspective on the show, but it prevented them from considering more fully why these programs were resonating with Americans at home. As the evaluators of programming, critics issued broader assessments of the taste level of television's imagined audience in tandem with their reviews. Their inability to understand their relationship with their audience only enhanced their distinction from and privilege over regular viewers. *Holocaust*'s success, both nationally and abroad, spotlighted television's impressive power to deliver a story of great power into the homes of its viewers. In many ways, this miniseries called attention to the unique values of the medium—its intimacy, its ability to convey complexity through character relationships, its appeal to emotion, and its longform narrative format. Yet the critical discourse tended to isolate only small parts of these larger themes, instead focusing on the taint of the commercial and a

question of historical accuracy. Every critic I spoke with admitted to loving television, often unabashedly. Too often, though, their writing failed to reflect their enthusiasm for the medium, an expression of pleasure that may have allowed them to connect more fully with and to understand better their audience.

### 3 THE PRIME TIME ACCESS RULE: MEDIA POLICY, FAILURE, AND THE HOPE FOR BETTER TELEVISION

“Covering TV from Topeka must be like covering baseball from a scoreboard.” ~Les Brown, *Variety*<sup>1</sup>

In 1979, journalist and TV critic Les Brown published *Keeping Your Eye on Television* as a guide for TV viewers about their role in shaping television content and regulation. Having worked many years as a reporter for *Variety* and the *New York Times*, Brown spoke from experience when he accused his colleagues in the press of failing to account fully for television as a regulated medium: “the press, as the public’s representative, kept its eye on the TV screen and not on what was going on behind it. Had it given the institution of television the same careful scrutiny it has given the institution of government, the press might have caused broadcasting to develop differently.”<sup>2</sup> Brown defined the press as the public’s representative—as the voice of the people—providing critics with a crucial role in contemporary discourse about the operations and impact of television

Brown was not the only person to write about the missed opportunity for critics to intervene with policy discourse in the 1970s. Discussing the influence of media trade publications upon the Federal Communication commission [FCC] and other governmental bodies, communication scholar and FCC consultant Barry Cole and media policy reporter Mal Oettinger condemned the lack of significant criticism of television both by print critics and by

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<sup>1</sup> Barry Cole and Mal Oettinger, *Reluctant Regulators: The FCC and the Broadcast Audience* (Reading: Addison-Wesley, 1978). 54.

<sup>2</sup>Brown, *Keeping Your Eye on Television*: 8.

commentators appearing as talking heads on the medium itself.<sup>3</sup> Their appraisals conveyed an assumption that a journalist critic's job was to evaluate not only the programs airing on the TV but also the process by which those programs were produced, distributed, and aired on TV screens throughout America. In this chapter, I examine these assumptions further, investigating the extent to which critics wrote about media policy and examining how they described their investments in these conversations as reporters, viewers, and critical commentators. In so doing, I will demonstrate that the question is not *whether* critics wrote about policy but *how* they wrote about policy.

More specifically, I will account for how critical discourse serves as a corrective to the top-down discourse disseminated by government regulators and television executives, restoring to the conversation attention to the programs at the heart of policy debates. Brown's quote above condemned critics' narrow focus on programs, divided from the industry context from which they emerge. My own attention to programs applies the sort of contextual analysis Brown seemed to call for. Often, policy matters focus so intently on the parameters of FCC jurisdiction or the responsibility of networks to advance the public interest that they occlude a practical examination of the experience of the public, who encounter television through the programs that enter their homes. Critics, with programming as their purview, contributed expertise in identifying the ways policy encouraged or discouraged creativity in terms of program production and circulation.

Media policy may seem an unusual topic for journalistic television critics, but it definitely was not an unusual topic during the 1970s.<sup>4</sup> This decade featured several crucial pieces

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<sup>3</sup> They did make an exception for critics like the *New York Times*' Jack Gould and the *Washington Post*'s Lawrence Laurent. Cole and Oettinger, *Reluctant Regulators: The FCC and the Broadcast Audience* 54.

<sup>4</sup> Critics tend to be so closely defined by their work as program reviewers that their other types of writing are underexamined. Moreover, other voices tend to be privileged in policy studies, like the regulators and

of policy activity and also a broader philosophical shift by the FCC from an activist regulatory environment to an activist deregulatory environment. Inspired by FCC Commissioner Newton Minow's "Vast Wasteland" speech at the National Association of Broadcasters' [NAB] Convention in 1961, the government advanced such policy actions as the cigarette ad ban, which resulted in broadcasters losing millions in advertising revenue. The Department of Justice [DOJ] also sued the three networks in 1972 for violation of anti-trust laws, settling the suit with each network on individual terms at the end of the decade.<sup>5</sup> Among the biggest legislative news of the seventies was the successful passage of copyright legislation by Congress in 1976, freeing cable companies to expand in significant ways.<sup>6</sup>

These were all significant stories, and many critics did comment on them. For example, Clarence Petersen of the *Chicago Tribune* wrote an impassioned piece after an article about the DOJ lawsuit failed to produce a single letter from his readers. Petersen argued that the DOJ lawsuit was significant, and he expected his audience to care about it as well. In fact, he was so frustrated by the public's apparent disregard for policy news in the entertainment pages that he titled this piece "Why Doesn't Anyone Care?"<sup>7</sup> Of most significance to this study was Petersen's conviction that policy reportage was not only of value for his readers but also an integral part of his role as critic.<sup>8</sup>

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the leaders of the TV industry who serve as primary points of contact for information about industry operations.

<sup>5</sup> The DOJ's suit was dismissed without prejudice by an Appeals Court in November 1974. The DOJ refiled their suit in December 1974. "Justice vs. Networks: Part II," *Variety*, December 18 1974.

<sup>6</sup> Other policy actions encouraged the growth of the cable industry, including the FCC's lifting of the leapfrogging prohibition that had prevented cable companies from importing distant signals to add to their program lineups. I discuss this topic more fully in chapter four.

<sup>7</sup> Clarence Petersen, "Well, Let's Go Thru This Once Again," *Chicago Tribune*, April 24 1972.

<sup>8</sup> The activist spirit of the 1960s persisted into the first half of the 1970s, personified by the eruption of citizen activism through license challenges initiated by women's and minority groups early in the decade and by religious and moral groups later in the decade. See Allison Perlman, "Feminists in the Wasteland: The National Organization for Women and Television Reform," *Feminist Media Studies* 7, no. 4 (2007). Also, Perlman's dissertation discusses four other case studies of citizen activism in other decades. Allison

This chapter defines media policy as the rules promulgated by any collective body that limits or defines the operations of broadcasting in terms of structure, content, or ownership.<sup>9</sup> The term “policy” most commonly refers to actions by the Federal Communication Commission, the national government body tasked with overseeing spectrum assignments and assigning licenses to those seeking to own and operate broadcast stations. Yet “policy” may also incorporate other national governmental bodies that design regulations or adjudicate the constitutionality of particular regulatory actions, including Congress, the Department of Justice, and the appeals court system.<sup>10</sup> Other stakeholders in policy debates include producers, distributors, local stations, advertisers and television viewers, yet the stakes for each group may be different or even in conflict in terms of individual policies. Due in part to the number of persons or groups with an investment in how broadcasting functions, policy matters are frequently hotly contested, and the debates about individual matters of policy can extend for years. Critics are one voice, frequently unacknowledged, in these debates.

This chapter is a revisionist history, arguing that critical discourse makes visible two primary occlusions in the top-down policy discourse disseminated by government bureaucrats

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Perlman, "Reforming the Wasteland: Television, Reform, and Social Movements, 1950-2004" (University of Texas at Austin, 2007). The FCC also conveyed a broader concern not only that audiences lacked appropriate access to the airwaves in terms of producing their own content but also that the public lacked essential information about media policy. Due to these beliefs, the regulatory body commenced a series of open-door meetings across the nation to engage more directly with the viewers whose ownership of the airwaves they protected. Another effort to encourage public interaction with media involved the public access mandates advanced by the FCC in a series of Report and Order rules. These rules ordered cable companies to make production equipment available so local residents could produce content of local origination and interest. Many of these efforts failed to elicit broad public involvement. Patrick R. Parsons, *Blue Skies: A History of Cable Television* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2008).

<sup>9</sup> In her discussion of the Telecommunications Act of 1996, Patricia Aufderheide distinguishes between policy based in a belief that government regulators protect citizens and policy based in a conceptualization of citizens as consumers, with purchase as a measure of choice. Patricia Aufderheide, *Communications Policy and the Public Interest: The Telecommunications Act of 1996* (New York: Guildford Press, 1999).

<sup>10</sup> This chapter focuses exclusively on national policy, though there may also be state or local policy regulations setting guidelines for the operations of local producers, distributors, and station owners.



and industry executives. First, critics draw attention to the real-time impact of policy upon programming, and they therefore lend policy debates an immediacy often lacking in the broader ideological battles among policymakers and industry figures. Second, the critic spotlights the point of view of the average viewer, accounted for in official policy discourse through vague references to the public interest but rarely invited to engage in direct conversation. In her examination of the Telecommunications Act of 1996, for example, Patricia Aufderheide contended that the public had been largely left out of the policy debates about this Congressional revision of the 1934 Communications Act. Noting that “policy does not make for high-concept news,” Aufderheide nevertheless insisted that the public were crucial stakeholders in the policy that guided media operations.<sup>11</sup> Critics serve as a link between top-down policy discussions and the audience requiring news about those discussions.

In my consideration of one prominent 1970s policy initiative, I examine how critics and journalists reported to the viewing public the debates surrounding the Prime Time Access Rule [PTAR]. Unlike the FCC, critics engaged daily with their readers, informing, educating, and commenting about the matters most likely to influence what programs viewers enjoyed on their televisions. This link with the actual public of the public interest necessarily increased the significance of whether, and how, critics reported and evaluated policy matters. The Federal Communication Commission’s passage of the PTAR was contentious and repeatedly challenged throughout the 1970s; two decades later, it was overturned.<sup>12</sup> What follows is not a study of successful policy but rather an examination of how various stakeholders, including critics, framed the issues, evaluated the claims, and described the stakes for the PTAR. Policy discourse provides insight into cultural values, and by interrogating how critics entered into these debates,

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<sup>11</sup> Aufderheide, *Communications Policy and the Public Interest: The Telecommunications Act of 1996*.

<sup>12</sup> The PTAR was repealed in 1996.

this chapter argues that critics mediate between government, industry, and audience and therefore serve as important, though often ignored, voices in policy discourse.

### *3.1 A Revisionist History of the Prime Time Access Rule*

A study of the PTAR features distinctive insights into the central concerns of this dissertation: understanding criticism as a profession, an historical source, and a site of scholarly analysis. The PTAR was a policy created by the FCC that shifted responsibility for programming one hour of prime time from the networks to the local station. The FCC hoped this limit on network power over programming would open a new market for independent producers by removing the competition of network programs. The PTAR was of particular interest to critics as professionals because it impacted both what programs appeared on television and when they aired. For example, critics informed their readers about the concrete, visible impact of new policy actions as when a program was forced to move to a new hour by policy-influenced scheduling changes. They translated policy theory into direct impact.<sup>13</sup> As historical sources, critical discourse serves a particular value for a media historian wanting to understand the way media policy threatened to improve or weaken the business and programming of television. Their writing about the PTAR tapped into wider, urgent conversations, including the preponderance of reruns and the overall diversity of television programming.<sup>14</sup> How critics engaged these topics for their readers, therefore, opened wider conversations about that contemporary moment in television history.

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<sup>13</sup> Perhaps more than the DOJ antitrust suit or copyright legislation, which operated several steps removed from programming, the PTAR fell under critics' unique purview.

<sup>14</sup> President Nixon even entered the conversation about reruns, suggesting that the widespread practice of recycling old programs endangered the Hollywood production industry during a time of economic recession.

Most urgently, critical writing for the PTAR provides an additional site for scholarly analysis of media policy, beyond the high-level discourse available in FCC records or legal analyses that have served as the customary primary sources for media policy studies. My interest in researching critical policy discourse has been inspired, in part, by the work of Bill Kirkpatrick, who advocates a “policy from below” approach to critical cultural policy studies. In his discussion of the overlooked contributions of John Fiske to policy studies, Kirkpatrick observes there is an “unhealthy fixation on the ‘official’ policy realm of government officials, regulators, industries, and legitimated representatives of the citizenry,” as if a top-down policy discourse is all that matters.<sup>15</sup> Kirkpatrick’s work therefore asks scholars to consider more than the top-down efforts and actions of the uniquely empowered, including FCC Commissioners, media industry executives, and Congressional representatives.

Critics are distinctively sanctioned to address policy matters and therefore intervene in this study as a corrective to the historical record that has not accounted for their writing. Positioned between the industry, the regulators, and the audience, the critic fulfills an intermediary role as a reporter. The critic, I propose, helps bridge the gap between Kirkpatrick’s policy from above and policy from below.<sup>16</sup> This study of how critics reported the PTAR,

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<sup>15</sup> Prominent examples of policy studies featuring a top-down discourse analysis include Thomas Streeter, *Selling the Air: A Critique of the Policy of Commercial Broadcasting in the United States* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996); Aufderheide, *Communications Policy and the Public Interest: The Telecommunications Act of 1996*; Philip M. Napoli, *Foundations of Communication Policy: Principles and Process in the Regulation of Electronic Media* (Cresskill: Hampton Press, 2001).

<sup>16</sup> Bill Kirkpatrick, “Play, Power, and Policy: Putting John Fiske Back into Media Policy Studies,” in *Fiske Matters: A Conference on John Fiske’s Continuing Legacy for Cultural Studies* (University of Wisconsin, Madison 2010). Two others works that have examined policy from below both traced citizen activists’ filing of station license challenges with the FCC in the 1960s and 1970s. In one, Allison Perlman describes the efforts of feminist activists with the National Organization for Women to demand more diverse representations of women on television, and in another, Steve Classen follows the successful license challenge of Mississippi station WLBT-TV to demand *any* representation of African Americans. Perlman, “Feminists in the Wasteland: The National Organization for Women and Television Reform.”; Steven D. Classen, *Watching Jim Crow: The Struggle over Mississippi TV, 1955-1969*, *Console-ing Passions* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004).

therefore, identifies the critic as a disseminator and translator for a wider audience of the top-down discourse constructed by the FCC and the network leaders. It also accounts for critics as participants in policy discussions, shaping popular understandings of the goals and achievements of the PTAR through the news and ideas they report and how they report them.

In the following discussion of the PTAR, I concentrate upon its first phase of development from 1970-1972 to challenge the historical reading of the PTAR as a failure. The PTAR attempted to limit network power by prohibiting local television stations from accepting the network programming feed for one additional hour of primetime each day. One goal of the PTAR was the encouragement of diversity—in terms of content and in terms of the producers providing that content. Prominent opponents of the rule, including FCC Chair Dean Burch, condemned the PTAR for failing to facilitate independent production of new and diverse programs, instead opening a market for game shows and off-network reruns. Critical writing exposed that this failure discourse surrounding the PTAR, articulated by stakeholders including FCC commissioners, network presidents, and station owners, oversimplified how the rule was implemented and failed to account for a series of decisions that weakened the rule. For example, during the year's first year of implementation in 1971, the FCC issued a one-year waiver of the prohibition of station use of off-network reruns. This rerun waiver undermined the efforts of independent producers to produce the diverse and innovative programs that proponents of the PTAR hoped it would inspire. More problematic, the failure discourse obscured examples of the rule's successes, documented most clearly below with a case study of *Story Theater*, a program produced by the independent Winters-Rosen production company. Because critics reviewed *Story Theater* and other program experiments that aired during the PTAR's first year of

implementation, their work issues a corrective to the dismissive view of the PTAR as producing only game shows and reruns.

In sum, the three lenses of the critic applied throughout this chapter document that the critic has been undervalued as a contributor to media policy discourse about the PTAR in the first half of the 1970s. As professionals, critics reviewed PTAR programs that have been marginalized by the historical record, leaving behind a trace of these programs' existence, uncovering the ways they have been overlooked by TV scholars. As a historical source, critics documented the fact that the PTAR was deemed a failure before it enjoyed a true test of its potential, exposing the uncritical ways scholarly perpetuation of the failure discourse not only privileges the perspective of the prominent opponents of the PTAR but also sharply contradicts evidence that the rule's potential was actively suppressed by those privileged figures. As a site for analysis, the work of critics challenged the way media studies scholarship has privileged analysis of the Financial Interest and Syndication Rules [Fin-Syn], at the expense of the PTAR. Included within the same set of rules known as the PTAR, Fin-Syn prevented the networks from claiming a financial stake in or syndication rights to programming they did not produce themselves. Without discounting the valuable contributions of media policy studies of Fin-Syn, scholars have nevertheless obscured the fact that in the 1970s, it was the PTAR that dominated the conversations throughout the television industry, including the pages of the nation's newspapers.<sup>17</sup> The PTAR deserves a more thorough reconsideration, and the critic provides the ideal lens through which to do so.

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<sup>17</sup> The FCC agreed to stay the Fin-Syn portion of the PTAR until October 1 of 1972 instead of 1971. They noted that Fin-Syn was "not as crucial" to the public interest as the PTAR. "More Time for Syndication Cut-Off," *Broadcasting*, October 19 1970, 38.

### 3.2 *The Prime Time Access Rule & Pre-emptive Failure*

While the PTAR was a rule that led to the flooding of the airwaves with game shows and reruns, Fin-Syn's impact has been deemed more significant by TV scholars.<sup>18</sup> Fin-Syn has attracted much scholarly attention because it has been viewed as facilitating a boom in independent television production during the 1970s, allowing such production companies as MTM Enterprises, Inc., Norman Lear's Tandem Productions, and Aaron Spelling's Thomas-Spelling Productions to retain syndication rights to their programs. Yet this focus on Fin-Syn in television and industry scholarship is a contemporary preoccupation, enabled by the perspective of historical distance. To some extent scholarly interest in Fin-Syn has distorted the historical record, suggesting that the PTAR was both less important and less discussed.<sup>19</sup> Yet at the time of the rules' passage, it was the PTAR that inspired most of the conversation among stakeholders, including network executives, independent producers, local station programmers, and—as the intermediary between those figures and the audience—television critics.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> For example, Jennifer Holt's now canonical essay about Fin-Syn contextualizes the end of the rule within the deregulatory mood that originated in the 1970s, arguing that the repeal allowed for new synergies in Hollywood production and distribution, intensifying a wave of corporate conglomeration. Jennifer Holt, "Vertical Vision: Deregulation, Industrial Economy, and Prime-time Design," in *Quality Popular Television*, ed. Mark Jancovich and James Lyons (London: BFI, 2003). Mara Einstein's book-length work on Fin-Syn contends that a primary flaw in the regulatory logic underlying the PTAR and Fin-Syn rules was that "all assume that source/outlet diversity will lead to content diversity." In her book, Einstein acknowledges the PTAR briefly, instead concentrating the majority of her attention on Fin-Syn. Mara Einstein, *Media Diversity: Economics, Ownership, and the FCC* (Maywah: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2004).

<sup>19</sup> There are two reasons the PTAR dominated conversations in the early 1970s. First, the FCC delayed Fin-Syn for several years, even though it was written into the PTAR as part of the same set of rules. Second, the Fin-Syn took some time to have an impact, as the development process generally took at least 18 months for a program to reach the air. That said, the fact that the PTAR had immediate impact makes it an ideal case study for understanding policy implementation.

<sup>20</sup> From a legal perspective on the PTAR, see Thomas G. Krattenmaker, "The Prime Time Access Rule," *Communications and Entertainment Law Journal* 74(1984-1985). For an economic perspective, see Harvey J. Levin, *Fact and Fancy in Television Regulation: An Economic Study of Policy Alternatives* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1980).

The PTAR developed from a broader conversation among regulators about the oligopolistic power held by the three commercial television networks: CBS, NBC, and ABC. In the 1970s, the three networks dominated primetime by distributing programs they either produced or in which they held a financial interest, in addition to operating a number of stations they owned. The common arrangement among the networks and their affiliates, or the individual stations that agreed to air a particular network's programming for their local viewers, entailed the affiliates "clearing" four hours of prime-time programming for network programs each evening. The PTAR ordered a shift in these distribution practices by preventing local affiliate stations and stations owned-and-operated by networks [O&Os] from accepting more than three hours of network programming each night. The rule did not dictate which hour needed to be returned, nor did it dictate the type of programming to fill the vacated slot. Significantly, though, the hour had to come from prime time, anywhere between 7 and 11 p.m.<sup>21</sup> This time frame guaranteed the local stations additional programming opportunities to reach a mass audience. By limiting the networks' control over this hour, the FCC hoped local stations would take it upon themselves to produce new programs or seek out programming from new sources. This approach was consistent with the FCC's limited power as an agency, authorized to regulate individual stations but not the networks that distributed primetime programming.

The history of the PTAR is long and complicated, so a brief review of its origins is useful. The FCC explored three times from 1950 to 1976 the question of whether the networks held too much power and if so, what the FCC could do, within the limits of their authority over licensed station operations, to limit network power. First, the FCC instigated in the late 1950s its

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<sup>21</sup> The PTAR "hour" is somewhat of a misnomer because most stations programmed local news in one half hour slot, leaving only one other half-hour slot for syndicated or locally produced programs.

first comprehensive review of networks practices since 1938.<sup>22</sup> No actions were taken upon release of the resulting “Barrow Report” in 1957.<sup>23</sup> A continuation of the Barrow Report, under the leadership of Network Study Chief Ashbrook P. Bryant, suggested in 1964 that the FCC limit network ownership of programming to only 50% of its prime-time schedule. During hearings in 1965 about the Bryant Report, Donald H. McGannon, president and chair of Westinghouse Broadcasting (also called Group W), extended Bryant’s suggestion in a comment to the FCC. He urged the commission to limit network ownership of programming in the top-50 markets and to prevent the networks’ claims to subsequent syndication rights. McGannon’s suggestion became in 1968 the FCC’s proposed “50-50 Rule,” known as such because it allowed networks to own or have a financial interest in only 50% of the programming airing on their network in the top 50 markets.<sup>24</sup> This incarnation of the rule was also sometimes disparagingly called “McGannon’s Rule” by opponents of the policy proposal.<sup>25</sup> The FCC dropped the 50-50 Rule in

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<sup>22</sup> With the industry still reeling from the quiz-show scandal, the radio payola scandal, and claims of improper action by FCC Chairman John Doerfer, the FCC’s decision to study the networks was not surprising. This focus on the networks was also consistent with a renewed activism initiated under President Kennedy’s FCC nominee, Chair Newton Minow. Roscoe L. Barrow, dean of the University of Cincinnati Law School, oversaw the inquiry into network practices. This investigation resulted in a 1400-page report released in October 1957 after a two-year study.

<sup>23</sup> The report’s official name was “Report of the Network Study Staff to the Network Study Committee,” but it was nicknamed the “Barrow Report.” Among the recommendations within the report were the elimination of option time (the network’s right of first refusal to affiliate time), the limiting of network ownership to three VHF stations, support for fewer mandates for how advertisers purchased time on the air, and the requirement that networks be licensed by the FCC in the same manner as affiliate stations. Far from revolutionary, these recommendations largely echoed similar proposals offered by Congressional committees in previous years. Once the committee made its recommendations, the process of implementation took years of hearings, debate, and alteration. The PTAR is one example—you can see the roots of the rule in the Barrow Report, but it was not until 1970 that the FCC passed an altered version of the rule.

<sup>24</sup> The FCC developed the 50-50 Rule in collaboration with the Department of Justice [DOJ], because the DOJ was concerned the network oligopoly was a violation of anti-trust laws. Despite their partnership here, the FCC and the DOJ later diverge in their view of PTAR due to their conflicting views on network power and the limits of government involvement.

<sup>25</sup> As the head of Group W, a company that not only owned a number of local television stations but also developed programs for syndication, McGannon and his company stood to benefit from the forced limitation of network production power. Emphasizing McGannon’s role with the PTAR not only implied



early 1970 due to concerns that it would disproportionately injure ABC, and the commission instead developed the Prime Time Access Rule. Without further comment or debate, the FCC hastily passed the rule in a 4-3 vote in May 1970.<sup>26</sup> The PTAR therefore had a 10-year gestation but a rather sudden birth.

The PTAR, which went into effect in the fall of 1971, asked licensed stations owners to program the Access hour with non-network programming. When station owners complained that they could not prepare new programs for the fall 1970 season in less than eighteen months, the normal development cycle for program production, the FCC upheld its prohibition of stations airing the network feed for one primetime hour each day, but it did issue a one-year stay on the PTAR's prohibition against station use of off-network reruns. It was not until fall 1972 that the PTAR was enacted fully. My case study will focus on these early years between 1970 and 1972, for by fall 1973 when the rule was considerably revised and relieved of its most stringent restrictions, it was already widely perceived to have failed to produce diverse programs and new sources of production.<sup>27</sup> How the PTAR failed before it ever really started will be the central research question of this case study.<sup>28</sup>

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that he had undue influence with the committee but also that the rule benefitted McGannon's company specifically. Further, it linked McGannon to the rule's fate—if a failure, he would take the blame.

<sup>26</sup> Technically, the PTAR included Fin-Syn, so the policy featured multiple rules. Nevertheless, to avoid confusion, I will refer to the PTAR as one rule to indicate my focus on the portion of the rules that returned a portion of primetime to the local stations.

<sup>27</sup> The FCC did issue one-off waivers for individual programs, but its rulings were inconsistent and as hotly contested as the rule itself.

<sup>28</sup> Established television production and distribution companies challenged the PTAR almost immediately upon its passage in 1970 through appeals to the FCC for a stay or repeal. For example, WB-TV and the National Association of Broadcasters requested in August 1970 that the FCC stay the rule for one more year while a study of its likely impact was conducted. "WB-TV Petitions FCC to Re-Study 3-Hour Primetime," *Variety*, August 5 1970. The rule was also challenged in an appeals court: *Variety* reported that CBS had filed a lawsuit challenging the PTAR in the Second Court of Appeals in New York, that NBC was also planning to appeal, and that Hollywood production companies including MCA-TV, Warner Bros Television, Time-Life Broadcasting were considering joining CBS's appeal. "No Time is Lost on Prime-Time Appeals," *Broadcasting*, August 17 1970. Beyond these high-profile objections, opponents of the PTAR also posed more practical questions about how the stations should implement the

The failure discourse that surrounded the PTAR throughout its development and implementation had become naturalized by 1972. As reflected in contemporary history textbooks that discuss the PTAR, it now enjoys a reputation as a well intentioned but flawed policy action, resulting in a flood of reruns in primetime. For example, Christopher H. Sterling and John Michael Kittross conclude their consideration of the PTAR with the typical view of the PTAR's impact: "the unfortunate result [of the PTAR] was a flood of inexpensive syndicated entertainment material—game shows, travelogues, some cheap variety and adventure programs—that was often worse than network programming."<sup>29</sup> In her television history textbook, *Only Connect*, Michele Hilmes echoes Sterling and Kittross' emphasis upon the game shows and reruns that filled the PTAR slot, though she also notes that half-hour news programs often filled the slot as well.<sup>30</sup>

Criticism of the PTAR depended on an expectation of what the rule was meant to achieve. Among the possible optimal outcomes from the point of view of the FCC were quality programming, independent sources of programming, local programming, and general diversity (of source, of program type, of representation within the programs, etc.). As such, any discussion of the PTAR's relative success depended upon not only identifying what the intended outcomes were but also what were the meanings of the terms employed to discuss it (i.e. are quality and diversity mutually exclusive?). In the following consideration of the critical discourse about the

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PTAR in September 1971. For example, the networks debated for some time which hour to return to their affiliates, each trying to anticipate the move of another network so they could counterprogram appropriately. The FCC stepped in and asked the networks to cooperate and select the same hour for each to return to their affiliates, and they agreed in March 1971 to return the 7:30 half hour. "Gentlemen's Agreement at 8-11," *Broadcasting*, March 15 1971.

<sup>29</sup> Christopher H. Sterling and John Michael Kittross, *Stay Tuned: A History of American Broadcasting* (Mayway: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2002). 419.

<sup>30</sup> Hilmes, *Only Connect: A Cultural History of Broadcasting in the United States*: 225.

PTAR, therefore, I will trace critics' expectations for the rule and their reactions to the rule's implementation.

### 3.3 *The Macro-View of the PTAR: Discursive Naturalization Through Repetition*

Critics enjoyed significant power in their role as disseminators of policy discourse. As intermediaries between industry and audience, critics reported the actions of the former, conveying them to readers in digestible form. For critics at the most prominent publications, industry executives and bureaucrats were counted among their regular readers, so their work not only informed and influenced "average" viewers but also content creators, program distributors, and policy makers. Thus despite the fact that critics were not featured voices in the top-down policy discourse articulated by regulators and television industry leaders, they were among its foremost disseminators and interpreters. Largely, critics reported the PTAR as a failure, formulating a discourse of failure throughout the PTAR's early years of development and implementation. As examined in more detail below, critics based this discourse of failure on an appeal to the FCC's naiveté about industry operations and on an undefined "quality" perceived to be lacking in the PTAR programs. Critics also sometimes unintentionally naturalized the discourse of failure through their reportage and repetition of the television industry's arguments against the PTAR. In all these ways, critical discourse provides insight to the macro-level view of the PTAR as a pre-emptive failure.

Les Brown was an industry reporter and program reviewer for *Variety*, so he delivered media news from a base of deep experience with industry operations and practices. Moreover, he frequently expressed in *Variety* his subjective opinions about the policy news he reported, crossing the line between objective and subjective reporting frequently. In terms of the PTAR,

Brown expressed concern that the FCC had not demonstrated an understanding of the structures and operations of the television industry in its passage of the PTAR. Les Brown was particularly articulate on these terms in his April 1970 *Variety* article, "FCC'S Primetime Pipe Dream." He contended that the PTAR demonstrated the FCC's complete failure to comprehend the economics of the television industry, particularly that "the profit motive is overriding," trumping the mandate to serve the public interest.<sup>31</sup> In this same piece, Brown reminded the FCC that local stations always held the right to pre-empt network programming should they wish to do so, so the PTAR's "gifting" to stations one hour nightly was in fact a right they could have claimed at any time in years prior. Stations did not pre-empt network programming more often, Brown argued, because the economics of local production demanded resources that stations lacked. Moreover, the popularity of network-financed programs made pre-empting illogical.

Les Brown's critique that the FCC failed to understand the deeper economic structures driving the station/network relationship were proven all too apt as independent producers and station owners echoed his concerns. For example, when local stations produced their own programs for the PTAR, they often found the programs were "too local" to appeal to the national syndication market. Keith Godfrey, the Vice President and Director of Sales for major Hollywood producer MCA-TV, explained the situation to *Variety* as follows: if a network quality program costing \$100K sells to 60 markets but fails in the big cities, the show cannot earn a profit.<sup>32</sup> Brown's experience as a critic and reporter empowered him to issue a strong critique of both the PTAR and the FCC's naiveté. His critique was then repeated by producers like Keith Godfrey of MCA, expanding Brown's argument and increasing its circulation. Brown's exposure of the FCC's naiveté pointed to the nasty underbelly of the distribution structure of American

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<sup>31</sup> Les Brown, "FCC's Primetime Pipe Dream," *Variety*, April 22 1970.

<sup>32</sup> Keith Godfrey, "First-run Production Doesn't Square With TV Economics—It's N.Y., Or Bust; Off-Web Series To Rule Fall Of '71," *Variety*, February 10 1971.

television—independent producers that failed to gain space on the network owned-and-operation stations [O&Os] in the top cities could not make a success of their shows. Even when the networks weren't functioning as producers, they could control distribution in the top markets through their O&O stations.

Brown's comments hinted at the true idiosyncrasy of network regulation—the FCC's power, in the end, was rather limited. Created as the Federal Radio Commission to prevent signal interference, the commission's primary power rested in their review and awarding of television licenses. As other media historians have documented, to make decisions about the relative value of a license application, the FCC historically favored those applicants with the most resources (money).<sup>33</sup> Once these patterns were in place, the FCC favored incumbents, particularly as citizens were disempowered as license challengers, lacking the "standing" required by the FCC.<sup>34</sup> The FCC's power therefore was over local station license holders, not the networks, and citizens were largely excluded as participants in policy debates.<sup>35</sup> This is why in its final incarnation, the PTAR targeted stations, limiting their acceptance of the network feed to three hours, thereby freeing one half hour each night for local news and one other half-hour program (for either original productions or syndicated programs). In essence, the FCC wanted to limit the networks, but it could only achieve that through the local stations. Perhaps this is why the FCC failed to account for station unwillingness to produce programming in its policy creation.

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<sup>33</sup>Susan Douglas, *Inventing American Broadcasting, 1899-1922* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987); Robert McChesney, "Free Speech and Democracy!: Louis G. Caldwell, the American Bar Association and the Debate over the Free Speech Implications of Broadcast Regulation, 1928-1938," *The American Journal of Legal History* 35, no. 4 (1991).

<sup>34</sup> It was the successful challenge of a Mississippi station based on racial discrimination that opened the floodgates of citizen-driven license challenges in the 1970s. Classen, *Watching Jim Crow: The Struggle over Mississippi TV, 1955-1969*.

<sup>35</sup> The networks did apply for licenses for their owned-and-operated stations, so they fell under the aegis of the FRC/FCC in that way.

Like *Variety*, industry trade publication *Broadcasting* enjoyed wide circulation within the television industry, and therefore it often played a role in circulating a macro-view of the PTAR. Specifically, *Broadcasting* framed the PTAR through a discourse of failure, citing as the criterion by which to judge the policy's failure its inability to produce "quality" programs, defined as the financial prowess of the commercial networks. The publication's reference to quality was somewhat disingenuous as the FCC cited diversity of programming sources as the most significant goal of the PTAR.<sup>36</sup> *Broadcasting* had in fact quoted the FCC's explanation for the rule's passage: "Our objective...is to provide opportunity—now lacking in television—for the competitive development of alternate sources of television programs."<sup>37</sup> Yet in the same issue, *Broadcasting* published an editorial declaring, "If enlargement of the supply of quality programming is the FCC's objective, this provides little promise of attainment."<sup>38</sup> *Broadcasting's* reference to quality here belied their reporting that diversity was a fundamental goal of the PTAR.<sup>39</sup> Notwithstanding, quality caught on with opponents of the PTAR besides those working at *Broadcasting*, and quality became such a rallying cry in opposition to the rule that when CBS, MCA, Inc. (a talent agency-turned production company), and others filed petitions against the PTAR with the New York Appeals Court, they framed their objections in part on the way the PTAR would lessen the quality of programming.<sup>40</sup> As the example of *Broadcasting* demonstrates, a trade publication addressing an audience of media insiders enjoyed far-reaching influence over setting the terms of the debate, shifting the focus from diversity to quality.

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<sup>36</sup> Einstein, *Media Diversity: Economics, Ownership, and the FCC*: 28. Diversity can be defined in multiple ways, though the PTAR likely meant to evoke multiple meanings of the term, from source diversity (diversity of content producers) to program diversity (generic program diversity).

<sup>37</sup> "Network Rule Comes Out of the Egg," *Broadcasting*, May 11 1970, 22.

<sup>38</sup> "Center Ring," *Broadcasting*, May 11 1970.

<sup>39</sup> "WBC, Metromedia Defend Prime-time Rule," *Broadcasting*, December 21 1970, 42; "Appeals Court Upholds Prime-Time Access," *Broadcasting*, May 10 1971.

<sup>40</sup> "Prime-time Foes Gird for Battle," *Broadcasting*, October 5 1970.

Other critics picked up on the quality mandate, and two articles from the *Washington Post* highlighted the complexity and potential emptiness of any application of the word “quality.” Lawrence Laurent featured an interview with independent producer Burt Rosen, who defined the term “quality” as “television that gets renewed for a second season.”<sup>41</sup> Rosen also argued that the failure rate of TV was high for everyone, even networks, so the relatively high number of Access programs that survived into a second season confirmed their relative value. Laurent, however, mentioned what Rosen did not—that the programs surviving into their second season were often shows like *The Lawrence Welk Hour* and *Hee Haw*, both programs that had been canceled by a broadcast network and resurrected for the PTAR. For Rosen, founder of independent production company Winters-Rosen, the PTAR promised a new primetime market for the types of programs his company produced. Winters-Rosen depended on the rule’s continuation. Laurent, however, did not have the same financial and artistic stakes—he perceived the promulgation of off-network reruns with concern and therefore qualified Rosen’s definition of quality.

Laurent’s fellow critic at the *Washington Post*, Tom Shales, also applied quality as the criterion against which to measure the PTAR’s failure. He wrote, “It’s criminal, criminal for the FCC to have made that rule. For them to believe that they could take time away from the networks and give it to the local stations and expect quality programs is a farce! Quality? With what? With a budget of 14 cents?”<sup>42</sup> Shales affirmed the network party line by equating quality with size of production budget—a budget that only networks could afford. Yet in the three articulations of quality expressed by Laurent, Rosen, and Shales, we see three different

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<sup>41</sup> Lawrence Laurent, “TV’s Controversial Prime Time Access Rule,” *Washington Post*, February 25 1973.

<sup>42</sup> Tom Shales, “Television Game Shows: They’re More Popular Than Ever,” *Washington Post*, October 11 1974, B11.

meanings: for Rosen, quality meant a second season; for Laurent, quality meant originality; and for Shales quality meant budget. As we saw in chapter two, quality operated as an empty signifier, evoking an aura of discursive significance yet deriving all of its meaning from context. The stakes each man expressed in their use of the term “quality” depended on their role within the industry and their desires for the PTAR.

By the time of the rule’s first round of modification in 1973, quality had become naturalized as a failed goal of the PTAR. Even the FCC adopted the rhetoric, noting that their unanimous vote for the proposed changes derived from a concern about the “kinds—and perhaps even the quality” of programs that affiliates were offering, rather than source diversity.<sup>43</sup> With so many meanings of the word “quality” in circulation, the various usages of the term reflected here did not clarify the standards according to which industry figures and critics employed the term. When *Broadcasting* and newspaper critics cited “quality” repeatedly as a failed goal of the PTAR, they not only obscured the FCC’s stated goal of diversity but also employed the term “quality” as a red herring.

### 3.4 *The Micro-View of the PTAR: Program Reviews as Historical Trace*

Critical discourse provides insight into the macro level discussions of the PTAR examined above, but it also highlights crucial micro-level analysis that has not been a feature of scholarly discussions of the PTAR. Far below the lofty rhetoric of network quality and FCC jurisdiction is a rather practical question—how did local stations program the PTAR slot? Studying critical discourse about the PTAR can provide unique insight not only into larger questions of the structures of broadcasting but also into the impact of the rules within individual

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<sup>43</sup> "A Reluctant FCC Passes A New Set of Rules on Access," *Broadcasting*, January 28 1974.



cities. The PTAR returned to local stations the authority and responsibility of programming the first half hour of primetime. Was it all network reruns and game shows? Critics were uniquely positioned to challenge or nuance the dismissal of the PTAR. In their conversations with independent producers, critics highlighted the variety of efforts by producers to provide for local stations new and original programming. These voices challenge the overbroad rejection of the PTAR as a failure, pointing out moments of possibility in its complicated history.

The FCC issued the greatest damage to the PTAR's prospects by announcing in fall 1970 a one-year waiver of the rule's off-network prohibition. In the months following the PTAR's passage in May 1970, the FCC received many complaints from anxious station owners that the planned start date for the PTAR in September 1971 was insufficient lead time for them to develop or identify new programming sources beyond the networks. In October of 1970, therefore, the FCC issued a temporary waiver on the PTAR's prohibition of off-network content, hoping this would appease the station owners of their worry. The waiver, however, impacted more than station owners and in fact damaged the production plans of independent producers hoping to take advantage of the new distribution market the PTAR had opened up. Off-network reruns tended to rate highly because audiences enjoyed watching programs with which they were familiar, so the PTAR's ban on these reruns meant to reduce competition for independent producers experimenting with new programs. When the FCC granted stations the permission to license and air off-network reruns for the first year of the PTAR's life, many stations seized the opportunity, leaving new, untested programs in the lurch.

There was no company more damaged by the one-year rerun reprieve than Westinghouse [Group W]. As the architect of the 50-50 plan (the precursor to the PTAR) and as Westinghouse president, Donald H. McGannon, highlighted the enormity of the damage the waiver had

inflicted on Group W. *Variety* invited McGannon to write an article in February 1971 in which he explained Group W's proposals for programs to air in the Access timeslot.<sup>44</sup> McGannon described Group W's extensive planning to develop seven new programs for the PTAR hour, but he conceded that the company reduced its production plans after an informal survey of program directors at local stations suggested a limited market for original programming due to the cheap availability of off-network fare.<sup>45</sup> Despite this setback, Group W's plans intensified for the following year's development cycle, as McGannon explained in a May 1971 letter to the FCC reported in *Broadcasting*. With budgets per show set at \$45,000, he announced four new programs, including *Norman Corwin Presents* and *The Smothers Talent Company*. Group W also produced a few local productions for the Group W-owned stations.<sup>46</sup> After viewing the Group W offerings in September 1971, the *New York Times*' John J. O'Connor deemed the Group W contributions to the Access time "surprisingly good, offering diversity, a good deal of innovation, less caution, more pioneering."<sup>47</sup> From O'Connor's perspective Group W had delivered on its promise to provide quality alternatives to network programming for the Access hour. Yet none of the Group W programs listed above survived into a second season. By the time the FCC lifted the off-net rerun waiver, therefore, a number of programs that attempted to take advantage of the new marketplace opened up by the PTAR already had been canceled. The undeniable fact was that they could not compete with a market flush with pre-tested, familiar off-network reruns.

Because programs like the Westinghouse shows existed for such a short time, the historical record has largely overlooked them. Critical discourse therefore offers a trace of the

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<sup>44</sup> Donald H. McGannon, "Group W and the Access Rule," *Variety*, February 10 1971.

<sup>45</sup> "Turmoil in the Program Market," *Broadcasting*, February 15 1971.

<sup>46</sup> "Westinghouse Fills the Hole It Emptied," *Broadcasting*, May 3 1971.

<sup>47</sup> John J. O'Connor, "Will it Pay to be Different?," *New York Times*, September 12 1971.

potential squandered. Because they wrote for a local market, critics also documented the different ways local stations in various regions of the country implemented the PTAR rule. Critics often addressed different programs and distinct circumstances in their local area, so reading across various publications provides a fuller portrait of the variety of programs that aired in the Access hour. Despite local distinctions, critics still shared one overriding priority in that they all shared a curiosity to see if network power had indeed limited the range of programs on the airwaves. The PTAR promised to put to the test an alternative vision of a production and distribution industry that was local, independent, and, if nothing else, different.

Notwithstanding, their work also contained surprising gaps in its coverage. Though critics sometimes reviewed PTAR programs, they did not review them with consistency and many PTAR programs received little to no attention from print publications. Critics who reviewed Access shows also often did not describe them as PTAR programs and thus removed from the programs from their regulatory context. Many other PTAR programs were not reviewed at all, particularly the game shows, like *Let's Make a Deal* and *Hollywood Squares*, and animal documentaries, like *Wild Kingdom*.<sup>48</sup> Perhaps more surprising was how rarely critics interviewed local station programmers to inquire about their plans for the PTAR slot. While *Variety* and *Broadcasting* undertook this sort of spot-checking by surveying programmers, the national focus of their articles discussed wider trends rather than addressing the particularities of the local market. Despite all these gaps, critics writing serve as the sole historical evidence of the reception of the PTAR programs. Research of the local PTAR market, therefore, becomes a fact-finding mission for the media historian, demanding one puts together pieces from scheduling guides, occasional critical reviews, and more comprehensive articles discussing the PTAR in its

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<sup>48</sup> Many of these programs had aired on daytime television or in primetime in years past, so the lack of attention to them is not terrifically shocking.

entirety. I will examine how critical discourse identified the best of the PTAR programs even while it failed to provide a thorough portrait of the programming experiments attempted before the radical stripping of the PTAR in 1973.

Clarence Petersen of the *Chicago Tribune* admitted in one article published in 1971 that he had never been a fan of the PTAR, but now he was confirmed in his view by actual evidence of the way Chicago stations had responded to the rule. Petersen's disdain derived from his interpretation of the goals of the PTAR: to give "creative producers" the opportunity to produce "experimental" programming. He noted that Chicago's WMAQ-TV provided an extra half-hour of news, supplemented by syndicated programming. In addition, WLS-TV extended a news program featuring local personalities Fahey Flynn and Joel Daly, and WWBM-TV filled all seven half hours with syndicated programs such as *The Goldiggers*, *The David Frost Show*, and even an NFL football clips program.<sup>49</sup> In Petersen's view, these programs were more of the same, lacking the innovation he hoped the PTAR would produce. His perspective on the PTAR, therefore, was more a reflection of his personal priorities than a consideration of whether the PTAR succeeded on other terms.

Petersen objected to the PTAR programs for other reasons as well. In a review of two new programs airing in the PTAR slot, Petersen slammed them for cheesiness and rote plotting.<sup>50</sup> Complaining that the PTAR was "supposed to result in better" programming, Petersen echoed the problematic quality line that so dominated the discourse of the rule's opponents. He did not

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<sup>49</sup> Clarence Petersen, "Filling the Prime-Time Void: An Underwhelming Assortment," *Chicago Tribune*, July 8 1971.

<sup>50</sup> Of *Dr. Simon Locke*, Petersen declared it to be the "worst dramatic show in television history" because of its absurd plotting, which he describes in detail. About the other PTAR program reviewed, *Stand Up and Cheer*, Petersen described the host as frantic and seemed to find the program full of energy but offering little substance. His review, however, is mostly a description of the program, without clear evaluative statements. Clarence Petersen, "Launching Television's Big Week," *Chicago Tribune*, September 14 1971.

explain the limited development time these programs enjoyed, nor did he detail the context of the PTAR as an effort to allow new producers access to primetime. Nevertheless, Petersen's detailed accounting for the types and variety of programs appearing in Chicago provided a fuller portrait of the actual generic diversity on display in the access hour there. Moreover, the simple fact that Petersen reviewed some of the PTAR programs in 1971 is itself worthy of note. Despite the fact that program reviews encapsulated a primary function of television criticism, it was surprising how many publications did not review the new PTAR programs that aired in primetime, the hours when the largest audience was gathered to watch TV.

Critical reviews served a promotional function in addition to an aesthetic evaluative purpose, and when critics did not review the PTAR programs, they limited the public's familiarity with these shows. For *Rollin' on the River*, a syndicated musical variety program produced by Winters-Rosen, only the *Los Angeles Times* and the *Chicago Tribune* reviewed it, with the *Los Angeles Times* offering seven short paragraphs of reasoned praise for the program it deemed hip and current. Another musical variety series, *Stand Up and Cheer*, featuring the Americana music of Johnny Mann, enjoyed two mentions in the *Chicago Tribune* and one in the *Los Angeles Times*.<sup>51</sup> The *Times* review suggested, "television needs this sort of thing."<sup>52</sup> The *New York Times* and *Washington Post* did not review either *Rollin' on the River* or *Stand Up and Cheer*. That doesn't mean the programs weren't airing in these markets, for the musical programs discussed above were often featured in the highlights section of the program schedule in each paper examined in this chapter.<sup>53</sup> Nevertheless, that the critic did not have the space or desire to evaluate these programs more fully likely limited the public's knowledge of these new

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<sup>51</sup> One of the *Chicago Tribune* pieces on *Stand Up and Cheer* was a harsh pan.

<sup>52</sup> Don Page, "Stand Up and Cheer," *Los Angeles Times*, September 13 1971; Petersen, "Launching Television's Big Week."

<sup>53</sup> These programs were featured to note who was the performer(s) each evening.

programs. From the perspective of historians researching this era, the lack of reviews for the PTAR programs creates a gap in the narrative, particularly for research about *individual* local markets.

It is striking how uneven and seemingly random is the coverage of these programs, even for a paper like the *Washington Post* that otherwise stood above its peers in terms of its attention to the PTAR shows. The *Washington Post* did not review such nationally syndicated programs as *Stand Up and Cheer*, but it did feature a number of pieces on locally produced programs. In a larger piece criticizing the PTAR in 1974, Lawrence Laurent described the rule as having “noble intent” and as relatively successful in terms of increasing access to the airwaves for non-network producers. The rule’s cultural significance, however, he rated much lower. Laurent offered one exception to the mediocrity of the PTAR fare in Washington, D.C.: CBS-affiliate Channel 9.<sup>54</sup> Citing this channel as unique in the DC area for its avoidance of low cost panel shows, Laurent listed *RX: Keeping Well with Dr. Tyson, Agronsky and Company*, and *Everywoman* as innovative, and he also cited *Treasure Hunt*, *Animal Worlds*, and *Thrill Seekers* as Channel 9 PTAR programs of some interest. Laurent’s praise derived less from the individual achievement of each program and more from their origins as non-network-sponsored programs. Of these programs, Laurent wrote individual pieces about only two: *Agronsky and Company*, a locally-produced public affairs program, and *Thrill Seekers*, a nationally syndicated program produced by Four Star Productions that featured real-life stunts. For *Thrill Seekers*, Laurent did not review the program but instead profiled its narrator, former star of *The Rifleman*.<sup>55</sup> Tom Donnelly, a sports writer for the *Post*, wrote a guilty-pleasure treatise about *Treasure Hunt*, a game show

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<sup>54</sup> Lawrence Laurent, "Oops—And Networks Cut Back Schedules," *Washington Post*, July 14 1974.

<sup>55</sup> Lawrence Laurent, "Right 'Chemistry'," *Washington Post*, June 30 1974; Lawrence Laurent, "Connors Finds a World of *Thrill Seekers*," *Washington Post*, July 29 1974.

from Chuck Barris Productions.<sup>56</sup> Three female reporters wrote three different pieces about *Everywoman*, a locally originated lifestyle program that the reporters decreed weak in terms of its problematic representation of women.<sup>57</sup> As the *Post*'s coverage confirmed, the PTAR programs did not earn thorough or consistent attention in critical discourse, and the trace examples provided here only highlight the missed opportunities.

Though they did not review many programs airing in the PTAR timeslots, both the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* evaluated the PTAR as a policy. In Washington, D.C., TV reporter John Carmody listed the PTAR programs that aired in the Access slot on local channels, but he wrote about them only after they had already suffered weak ratings.<sup>58</sup> In so doing, he highlighted a concerning trend for the network affiliates—having made changes to accommodate the PTAR, they were now vulnerable to the competition from local independent stations. As Carmody described the situation in D.C., the CBS affiliate, WTOP-TV, offered four new shows in its PTAR half hour, including *The Goldiggers*, *Rollin' on the River*, *Stand Up and Cheer*, and *Sports Illustrated*. The independent, WTTG-TV, buried WTOP in the ratings, forcing WTTG to replace the new programs with old *Dragnet* reruns.<sup>59</sup> Thus while the *Washington Post* did not feature a single review of the programs mentioned above, it implicated them in the failure of the PTAR months after they were deemed “failures.”

A *Washington Post* article about the PTAR by sometimes reviewer Alan Kriegsman illustrated some of the contradictions evident in journalistic accounts of the PTAR, particularly a

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<sup>56</sup> Tom Donnelly, "The New Treasure Hunt: A Real Screamer of a Game," *Washington Post*, June 13 1975.

<sup>57</sup> Judith Martin, "More for Women," *Washington Post*, August 10 1972; Judy Bachrach, "Giggles, Gab and Fidgets, but Too Little Equality," *Washington Post*, September 24 1973; Jean M. White, "Fetal Research in Controversy," *Washington Post*, February 22 1975.

<sup>58</sup> John Carmody, "The Fuzzy Prime Time Picture," *Washington Post*, May 6 1972.

<sup>59</sup> Note that my use of the term “force” is descriptive of the tone within the piece, not necessarily an affirmation of the necessity of the shift.

failure to account for the lacks within his own paper's coverage.<sup>60</sup> Kriegsman highlighted the role that the media played in dispensing a narrative of failure about the PTAR: "the issues at stake have been so obscured by crocodile tears, hypocritical denunciations from vested interests and pure poppycock, that the public hasn't the vaguest idea of the consequences for its own good or ill."<sup>61</sup> Despite his concern that the public was being misled about the PTAR, Kriegsman did not mention his own paper's failure to consider the value of individual PTAR programs. Through its spotty coverage of the PTAR programs, the *Post* contributed to the public's ignorance that Kriegsman derided.

Instead of interrogating his own paper's role in promoting the PTAR programs, Kriegsman put the blame partially in the hands of the FCC, for their amending of the PTAR in 1970 to allow a year's grace on the use of off-network reruns, and partially in the hands of the local stations, who took what was easily available instead of developing original productions. Kriegsman wasn't a network apologist, for he critiqued any assumption that the networks would have offered better quality in the same time slot. As evidence, he pointed to the mediocrity of what currently aired on network television. Further, in terms of cultivating more competition, Kriegsman noted the rule had definitely succeeded.<sup>62</sup> He even identified three PTAR programs that he felt demonstrated the rare courage displayed by some stations that did offer innovative and challenging programs, including family program *Story Theater* and news programs *Caution* and *Black on White*. Despite Kriegsman's praise, no one at the *Post* reviewed any of those three programs. This example demonstrated a disconnect between the critic's role as evaluator of programs and their role as a reporter of industry news. This disconnect prevented Kriegsman's

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<sup>60</sup> Kriegsman was a culture critic, but he wrote most often about music and theatrical performance. Within my framing, he is therefore an outsider to TV criticism, which he wrote about rarely.

<sup>61</sup> Alan M. Kriegsman, "Prime-Time Puffery," *Washington Post*, May 7 1971.

<sup>62</sup> Kriegsman cited FCC Commissioner Nicholas Johnson in support of the claim that the PTAR sought to enhance competition.



work from identifying more fully the examples of successes of the PTAR in D.C. in order to hold accountable those local stations who took the easier route.

Critics were at once bringing to some PTAR programs needed attention while also missing the opportunity to highlight more of the diversity of programs syndicated nationally and produced locally airing during the PTAR hour. Their work has left historians with glimpses of a challenge to the now naturalized narrative that the PTAR failed to inspire independent producers to enter into the U.S. primetime distribution marketplace. When considered across the publications featured here, these scant traces construct a deeper story of the structural limitations that persisted despite the PTAR's attempt to reduce the three networks' domination of primetime. Independent producers remained somewhat dependent on the networks because their O&O stations in America's largest cities were key distribution outlets for the PTAR programs. Further, pre-tested programming concepts tended to earn higher ratings because audiences' flocked to what they recognized. These were the strong challenges facing independent producers hoping to exploit the new Access hour, and critical discourse serves as our primary source to learn more about the individual programs that filled the PTAR hour across the U.S. Below I offer a case study of *Story Theater*, a program that was at once a realization of the hopes of the PTAR and also a cautionary tale of the slim odds facing independently produced programs seeking success in the syndication market.

### 3.5 *A Case Study of Story Theatre and PTAR Program Reviews*

During the first year of the PTAR in 1971, *Story Theater*, adapted from a Tony-award-winning theatrical play, highlighted the best hopes and the worst fears about the PTAR. The program is an excellent mini-case study of innovative PTAR fare in its own right because its

producers, Burt Rosen and David Winters, formed Winters-Rosen Productions Co. in 1969 as a new, independent production company to exploit the primetime possibilities opened by the PTAR.<sup>63</sup> Thus Winters-Rosen is exactly the type of new entrant to the industry the FCC likely envisioned in its goal of diversity—with the PTAR increasing diversity not only of programming content but also of programming source. Two critics featured *Story Theater* prominently: John J. O'Connor of the *New York Times* and Cecil Smith of the *Los Angeles Times*. Their pieces promoted the program but they also revealed the complicated negotiations the critics performed in their discussions.

O'Connor introduced *Story Theater* in an October 1971 article in the *New York Times* explicitly as a PTAR program, developed for the Access timeslot and syndicated station by station across the country.<sup>64</sup> The source of *Story Theater* had been a theatrical play, so O'Connor noted that Broadway critics had praised the show the past year—he therefore framed the program within the unique context of New York viewers who may already be familiar with the program's adaptation of Grimm's fairy tales.<sup>65</sup> O'Connor was himself a fan of the show, as both a play and a television program, and he perhaps revealed his personal investment in the PTAR when he assured his audience that the strength of the episode discussed in his article was "heartwarming news for viewers concerned about the future of imaginative programming." He told readers that that the program was "quality," and as explained in more detail later in the article, he seemed to have used this term to reflect production values. Praising the concept as strong, O'Connor nevertheless noted that sometimes the program's technical execution did not achieve the same level of quality: "the episodes have tended to be somewhat uneven, featuring several stories of

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<sup>63</sup> Cecil Smith, "Story Theater in Prime Time," *Los Angeles Times*, June 29 1971.

<sup>64</sup> John J. O'Connor, "Story Theater Catches 'Blue Light' Magic," *New York Times*, October 25 1971.

<sup>65</sup> In New York, therefore, *Story Theater* fit within the televisual practice of adapting media from other, known art forms or contexts.

varying lengths and, unfortunately, varying effectiveness.” For O’Connor, the measure of *Story Theater* depended largely on its successful adaptation for the unique medium of television. His piece concentrated closely on an appraisal of the program’s production quality. In terms of the New York market, O’Connor admitted that PTAR programs like *Story Theater* were faring poorly in terms of ratings. While other PTAR experiments in 1971 had proven “dismal,” O’Connor assured his audience that *Story Theater* was an exception. This program, he posited, was being “watched closely” as a “key test” of the PTAR. The stakes for *Story Theater* were high, as explained by O’Connor, since the program carried the weight of the PTAR’s success or failure.

O’Connor also mentioned, briefly, that *Story Theater* was filmed in Canada, implicitly acknowledging a contentious fact that the PTAR resulted in a number of international co-production arrangements. O’Connor added this detail of the program’s industrial origins as an aside, somewhat buried as a dependent clause: “The series, being taped in Vancouver, British Columbia, by Winters-Rosen Productions, is based on the...stage play.” He neither expanded upon the comment nor stated that its filming in Canada could be problematic, but the reference stood in the piece, nevertheless, as an example of a U.S. collaboration with another country’s television industry. International co-production arrangements and imported fare were relatively prominent among the PTAR programs, and the increase in foreign investment in the American television market became a target of opponents to the PTAR as damaging to the local production industry. For example, in a 1973 *Broadcasting* article titled, “Major Producers Say FCC Plan Backfired,” the trade publication cited data from a research study funded by four Hollywood production companies that confirmed foreign-produced programs in the PTAR timeslot had

increased from .1% to 20%.<sup>66</sup> There are many qualifications that could be made about this study—it only focused on the top 24 programs, those with the highest ratings and circulation, so a program like *Story Theater* was not a factor in this study. The larger point, however, was that the *Broadcasting* piece conveyed an anxiety that the PTAR facilitated an international incursion into the American television market. Critics writing about *Story Theater* in 1971 exposed this line of attack on the PTAR already in discursive circulation in the PTAR's first year of implementation.

Opponents of the PTAR pointed to statistics about the increase in foreign produced programming as increasing the economic troubles facing Los Angeles television workers. In the early 1970s, the United States broadly, and the Hollywood production industry narrowly, was suffering an economic recession. Opponents of the PTAR cited not only that the PTAR had removed from Los Angeles the network production work that had aired at 7:30 p.m. in years prior, but also that the rule had allowed foreign syndicators to sell their wares here with greater frequency. For example, one program that earned praise from John J. O'Connor was the British import *Black Beauty*, a program that O'Connor argued represented a stark challenge to the claim that the PTAR produced only low-quality programming.<sup>67</sup> O'Connor may have been correct that *Black Beauty* was a quality PTAR program, but opponents were quick to point out that it was not a quality *American* program.

Moreover, American producers, like Winters-Rosen, had arranged co-production deals with other countries and were filming their PTAR programs abroad as runaway productions. Like *Story Theatre*, *Norman Corwin Presents*, produced by the Westinghouse Company, was

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<sup>66</sup> "Major Producers Say FCC Plan Backfired," *Broadcasting*, January 15 1973. See also "A Genealogical Track on the Access Stars," *Broadcasting*, January 15 1973., for more about the study cited here.

<sup>67</sup> O'Connor, "Varying Program Norms with 'Family Entertainment'."

shot in Canada.<sup>68</sup> National General TV, a short-lived American distribution company, formed a co-production with Canada's CTV for *The Married Youngs*. These sorts of co-production deals allowed independent producers within the U.S. to finance original programming during years of recession in the U.S., and to do so affordably. Due to concern about the employment crisis in the Los Angeles production industry, however, programs that were shot outside the U.S. were viewed as contributing to the deeper national problems that had left many media workers in L.A. out of work.<sup>69</sup>

Cecil Smith, writing from the heart of the struggling Los Angeles television production industry, wrote a series of pieces about the anxiety over foreign production. In an interview with National General TV's head of production, Seymour Berns, Smith reported Berns' response to complaints that his company was injuring American production workers by filming a PTAR program abroad. Berns strongly rejected these critiques. As a former president of the National Academy of Television Arts and Sciences, Berns personally understood the stakes for Los Angeles production workers. Nevertheless, for Berns, the PTAR was a "promised land" for independent producers.<sup>70</sup> In the framing of his article about Berns, however, Smith appealed to xenophobic anxieties by foregrounding the international parentage of the program. Critical attention to the production origins of the Access programs was therefore not only unusual level

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<sup>68</sup> *Black Beauty* scored stronger ratings than either *Story Theater* or *Norman Corwin Presents*, and it, too, was produced by an international co-production team.

<sup>69</sup> A report compiled by Dr. Alan Pearce, consultant to the FCC, noted that foreign producers could sell their programs cheaply in the U.S. because they also earned money in their home country. The implication was that their unfair advantage lowered rates in the U.S. and served as unfair competition for domestic producers. "Access Rule Hurts Majors in Hollywood, FCC Analyst Tells Burch," *Broadcasting*, August 14 1972.

<sup>70</sup> Cecil Smith, "Networks' Grip on TV in Jeopardy," *Los Angeles Times*, April 21 1970. Independent Television Corporation, part of Associated Television [ATV] out of Great Britain, also offered programs filmed in England for the PTAR syndication market.

of detail about industrial relationships but also reflected wider concerns that the PTAR had opened the door to foreign producers wanting to exploit the American commercial market.

Cecil Smith also connected the anxiety about the increased influence of foreign companies in the U.S. television market to his story about *Story Theater*.<sup>71</sup> According to producer Burt Rosen, the PTAR made it possible for his company to syndicate *Story Theater*, a program that he believed could never have succeeded on the mass-appeal driven commercial networks in the U.S. Even as a theatrical play, the show had built its reputation slowly, and Rosen had at the time of the *Times* article secured only 25 commitments from local stations wanting to carry the program. With this slow syndication growth, Winters-Rosen's unique co-production deal with Canada's commercial network, CTV, facilitated the first season of *Story Theater*. It would air in Canada, guaranteed airing on a number of stations there, and then Winters-Rosen would license the program to individual stations across the U.S.

Producing *Story Theater* in Vancouver offered several financial benefits for Winter/Rosen. First, the television program would air first on CTV and then in the US on local stations at 7:30 p.m. (EST). With the double exposure, it helped spread the program's reach and increase its revenues. Second, production of the same programs in Los Angeles would double the price. For a show with a 25-station pickup, Rosen noted, the episode could not cost more than \$45,000, below the \$100,000 budget for network programs. Some independent producers intimated that the \$100,000 budget in the U.S. was not a reflection of actual production costs. For example, Fremantle president Paul Talbot, a producer of a British-originating barter PTAR program, complained that U.S. costs were padded. He explained, "the whole syndrome of production escalation in the U.S....begins with an executive producer making as much as \$25,000 for an hour show, and extends through double and tripled writers' fees and down to such

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<sup>71</sup> Smith, "*Story Theater* in Prime Time."

padding as charges for mimeograph machines by the hour.”<sup>72</sup> Despite these justifications, runaway programs like those produced by Winters-Rosen drew fire from PTAR opponents.<sup>73</sup>

Yet the realities of economics persisted. Independent producers lacked the same funding capabilities of the networks, so to make programs of similar quality, they had to cut expenses somewhere.<sup>74</sup> Critical reporting of *Story Theater* introduced a deeper narrative about the PTAR’s early history because it stood as one prominent example of the PTAR in action. *Story Theater* also illustrated the variety of values critics ascribed to the terms “diversity” and innovation. While critics widely agreed that *Story Theater* was both innovative and contributed to the diversity of programs content and program source, they nevertheless exposed how its international co-production deals undermined the program’s legitimacy as a true PTAR success story.

In New York, *Story Theater* struggled to earn a million viewers, a rating that O’Connor admitted was not enough for success on television, despite the fact that he perceived the program to be “superb” and “imaginative.”<sup>75</sup> Independent companies like Winters-Rosen generated some attention with productions like *Story Theater*, yet this program was one to suffer from the FCC’s one-year reprieve from the PTAR’s ban on use of off-network programs in October 1971.<sup>76</sup> As noted with the example of Group W, the waiver dramatically wounded existing independent companies by narrowing their market share, forcing them to compete with the familiar and popular rerun. When the FCC allowed network reruns, many local stations logically chose the

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<sup>72</sup> “*Black Beauty* Not Saddled With U.S.-Style Padded Costs; That’s Key To Maintaining Quality, Says Talbot,” *Variety*, October 25 1972.

<sup>73</sup> Rosen responded that only 15 of 49 Access programs were produced outside the U.S. Laurent, “TV’s Controversial Prime Time Access Rule.”

<sup>74</sup> Due to the costs of original production, television stations flocked to accept barter programs, produced by advertisers and offered for free to local stations.

<sup>75</sup> O’Connor, “*Story Theater* Catches ‘Blue Light’ Magic.”

<sup>76</sup> “More Time for Syndication Cut-Off.”

more reliable rerun over the novel *Story Theater*. Despite its positive mentions in the *Los Angeles Times* and the *New York Times*, *Story Theater* did not earn a second season.<sup>77</sup>

### 3.6 *The PTAR and Regulatory Ideology*

The PTAR made visible a fundamental flaw in the FCC's regulatory ideology: local stations entrusted to protect the publicly owned airwaves more often than not abdicated their responsibility over primetime in favor of network programming blocks. Les Brown hit the station managers pretty hard in a series of articles about the PTAR, but he spoke of them as an abstraction without any individual examples: "An even larger share of the blame for the three-hour rule should be laid to the local stations, which over the years have created the impression in Washington that all the sins of television are network sins and that the webs, in claiming the choicest television time, deprive the stations of the opportunity to serve better locally."<sup>78</sup> Brown therefore held up the PTAR as final evidence that the stations were themselves as much a part of the problem of mediocre television programming as were the networks that provided them with the bulk of their evening schedule. The absence of the voice of the station manager in critical discourse was significant because the FCC entrusted local stations as license holders. The glimpse of the programmer visible in Brown's work suggested that the public airwaves were overseen by an absentee landlord. Without more attention to this figure, critics were unable to issue a more targeted and detailed critique, particularly in terms of local programmers and stations.

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<sup>77</sup> Cecil Smith, "It's Still March and All of a Sudden, Pop Goes the Season!," *Los Angeles Times*, March 19 1972; Laurent, "TV's Controversial Prime Time Access Rule."; O'Connor, "*Story Theater* Catches 'Blue Light' Magic."

<sup>78</sup> See also Les Brown, "FCC: Is it Rule or is it Ruin?," *Variety*, January 20 1971.



Proponents of the PTAR, like Winters-Rosen producer Burt Rosen, critiqued stations for their “corrosive negativism” and “‘push-button’ mentality.”<sup>79</sup> Critics, too, spotlighted the prominent role stations were asked to play to make the PTAR a success. *Los Angeles Times* critic Cecil Smith, who had championed *Story Theater* and reported rather positively about the PTAR, changed his tone at the beginning of 1972. The second year of the PTAR’s life was is the first “real” test, the first year the FCC enforced its ban on off-network programming. Listing the variety of programs available on local Los Angeles television during the Access hour, including such shows as *Young Dr. Kildare*, *Stand Up and Cheer*, *Hollywood Squares*, *Lassie*, and *Wild Kingdom*, Smith complained: “these are the network owned and operated stations, the class of the nation. And if there’s anything on the above list that you are eagerly awaiting, you’re a better man than I am.”<sup>80</sup> Smith was upset about programming, but he also laid the fault at the feet of the O&O stations, which he believed capable of programing better material. Even *Broadcasting*, which criticized the PTAR frequently, accused the stations of failing in their duties. After a few station representatives asked the FCC to define its preferred program types for the PTAR hour, the editors of *Broadcasting* warned, “when broadcasters begin to think that way, they have begun to think like public utilities and have forfeited their claims to independence as purveyors of enlightenment and entertainment.”<sup>81</sup>

These negative assessments of station programming authority were relatively isolated voices, however, and their critique did not grow to a fuller prominence in discussions about the PTAR’s relative failure. Critical discourse provides a needed historical corrective to the dismissal of the PTAR as a failure, but their work nevertheless failed to account fully for a crucial figure to the implementation of the PTAR: the local station manager. I did not find one

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<sup>79</sup> "The Agitation over Access Rule," *Broadcasting*, February 14 1972, 27.

<sup>80</sup> Cecil Smith, "FCC Set to Kill Prime-Time Rule," *Los Angeles Times*, August 1 1972.

<sup>81</sup> "Running for Cover," *Broadcasting*, March 15 1971.

extensive interview by critics with the program director of an affiliate or independent station. Instead, the program manager usually appeared in articles as an anonymous informant, exposing the deep inadequacies of the FCC's reliance on licensed stations to take responsibility for their program schedule. TV critics operated under two different local imperatives—the needs of their readership as defined by their newspaper and the needs of the TV viewing audience as defined by their TV beat. With the PTAR, critics largely missed an opportunity to investigate and challenge the lack of leadership by their local stations. While their work offered a trace of PTAR programs now forgotten, their failure to draw a fuller portrait of the connection between their local station owners and the programs airing in the PTAR slot seems particularly egregious considering their unique responsibility to a local viewing audience.

This oversight also suggests that the ideology of localism has always existed more in rhetoric than in reality. As Philip M. Napoli has argued, “localism” as a concept never appeared in the Communications Act of 1934 yet nevertheless persists as a “touchstone value” of American broadcasting.<sup>82</sup> Localism, as Napoli describes it, is not a concept unique to broadcasting but rather traces back to the early days of newspapers, when papers received a postal subsidy from Congress. Napoli has examined localism from two angles—content-based and geography-based, and he has found that both suffer from the absence of an empirical evidence of success. When ratings stand in for audience representation, he suggests, policy makers lack authentic data to assess local efforts. Without this data, policy decisions become capricious, driven more by ideology than facts. Critics were not only in a position to advocate for a genuine localism in their consideration of the PTAR, but they were also in a position to provide a grounded, detailed analysis of the local programming choices and the extent to which stations

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<sup>82</sup> Philip M. Napoli, "The Localism Principle in Communications Policymaking and Policy Analysis: Ambiguity, Inconsistency, and Empirical Neglect," *Policy Studies Journal* 29, no. 3 (2001).

took advantage of the PTAR. They rarely considered the PTAR from this perspective, however. Instead, they employed such considerations as innovation and quality, neglecting the localism aspect of the PTAR.

At the heart of the PTAR debate was a question of financing: for stations to operate as producers without an economy of scale, their disadvantage was so great as to be insurmountable. Critics affirmed this negative view of the PTAR each time they used a term like “network quality program” or failed to account for localism. Ideologies are not only built but also must be carefully maintained, and critics were an important voice in maintaining the status quo of television. Consider this faint praise: in his final piece on the PTAR in 1973, Cecil Smith asked independent producer Burt Rosen whether things had changed for the better. Rosen replied that program executives in the mid-1970s now had to think about what they were going to program, “not for long, for about twenty seconds, but they’ve got to think.”<sup>83</sup> In other words, the PTAR delivered twenty seconds of the possibility of change, immediately thwarted. By the time of his comment here, Rosen’s *Story Theater* was long canceled, victim of a policy that was dead on arrival.

### 3.7 Conclusion

Critics’ writing about the PTAR issued a corrective to the simplistic disregard for the PTAR as a failure, as nothing more than a game show generator. In their discussions of international co-productions, their conversations with independent producers, and their occasional review of the quality PTAR program, critics made visible the possibilities of the PTAR, the opportunities forgotten. In their discussion of “official” policymakers, however,

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<sup>83</sup> Cecil Smith, "Prime Time Rule: the Beef [Sic] Goes On," *Los Angeles Times*, June 5 1973.

critics demonstrated a sharp cynicism, doubtful of the expertise of policymakers and critical of their ingenuousness. With a strong vested interest in policy that would encourage the diversity and sophistication of programming, it was surprising how often critics presented a defeatist attitude, or at the least echoed the critiques of those who stood to lose much from the PTAR.

This research also makes clear what is the contribution of the scholar in analyzing this discourse: deepening context, challenging a-historicity, and shining a light on the paths not taken. Because scholars de-naturalize ideologies and approach television history at a remove, our consideration of critical writings can pick up on threads critics may not themselves have pursued more fully at that time. But scholars also may examine moments where critics failed to challenge the institutional structures of television, where they have missed the opportunity to encourage strong and unified action among the audience. The larger point of this chapter, however, is not a condemnation of critics but rather a desire to witness the potential of critics as change-makers. This case study of PTAR documents that critics did view policy reportage as their purview, and their intervention into a conversation that largely occurred in the isolated realm of the upper echelon of the television industry is itself a contribution worthy of more consideration.

#### 4 TV CRITICS AND THE ‘SUPER’ STATION: TECHNOLOGICAL REVOLUTION AND THE STATUS QUO

“America has always liked the underdog. Now, thanks to WTCG’s satellite link to cable stations throughout the country, it is getting a full dose of the down and out.” ~Sports Journalist, *Atlanta Journal*<sup>1</sup>

Great man stories can be fun to tell, and histories of media technologies are full of them.<sup>2</sup> Journalistic accounts in particular tend to highlight individuals as responsible for broader moment of media change. In my research about WTCG, the satellite superstation, I found reporter after reporter heralding the genius of Ted Turner, owner of WTCG, in passages similar to this except from an article by a reporter for the *Washington Post*: “A wise-guy millionaire from a billboard fortune, an establishment-baiter kicked off his own Atlanta Braves by the fulminating commissioner of baseball, a local TV and radio magnate swaggering among the scions of Larchmont, an over-eager, overbearing, over-sexed symbol of updating ambition let loose in Newport Harbor with an Errol Flynn mustache under the visor of a \$2 railroad engineer’s cap.”<sup>3</sup> Versions of the same story about Turner’s genius and charisma were repeated again and again in newspapers across the country throughout the 1970s.<sup>4</sup> Without doubt, Turner’s business acumen deserves respect, and his colorful personality makes reading about

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<sup>1</sup> Gary Caruso, "The U.S. Braves: Ted Turner's Satellite System Gives Atlanta Sports to Nation," *Atlanta Journal*, August 31 1977.

<sup>2</sup> In *The Columbia History of Television*, for example, editor and author Gary Edgerton traces the battle between men most often credited with inventing television, including Philo T. Farnsworth and Vladimir K. Zworykin. Gary R. Edgerton, *The Columbia History of Television* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007). Similarly, Susan Douglas traces the contributions to television history of Lee de Forest. Douglas, *Inventing American Broadcasting, 1899-1922*.

<sup>3</sup> Christian Williams, "Super Station’s Super Man," *Washington Post*, February 11 1979.

<sup>4</sup> See also Sam Hopkins, "Turner Makes Ch. 17 Work with Sports," *Atlanta Journal*, December 25 1972; Wayne Minshew and DeWitt Rogers, "A Winner: The Brash New Kid in Atlanta Sports," *Atlanta Journal*, January 8 1977; Nicholas Von Hoffman, "Cable TV threatens networks," *Chicago Tribune*, April 10 1979; Alexander Auerbach, "Satellite, Cable Systems: Superstations Making Waves in TV Industry," *Los Angeles Times*, April 18 1979.

him rather fun. Moreover, his technological experimentation helped transform Atlanta's WTCG, a last-place independent television in the south, into a national cable channel received in millions of homes across America.<sup>5</sup> In this chapter, instead of adding to the historical record one more story of a great man prompting a technological revolution, I examine the limits of the great man trope and other tropes prominent in journalistic discourses about television technology. Through a case study of the way television critics reported the emergence of satellite superstation WTCG from 1975-1980, I will emphasize how critics challenged tropes of technological revolution by providing a historical perspective on past moments of limited technological revolution within the broadcasting industry.

In terms of their profession, critics offered a unique perspective on the study of televisual technology broadly and the satellite superstation narrowly. Their job required them not only to comment upon new forms and means of viewing television, but because the satellite was implicated in each, they also had to contemplate the impact of new distribution technologies upon the industry and the programs it produced. Reporting satellite news stretched the parameters of the profession as it had developed thus far, demanding that critics describe for their readers the complex technological processes facilitating differently over-the-air, cable, and satellite transmissions. Critics translated the potential for new technological uses, but they also framed these possible uses in terms of how they could change current industry or audience practices. Again, operating at the intersection of the industry and the audience, critics mediated between the goals of an industry confronting technological change and the viewing practices of their audience.

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<sup>5</sup> Throughout this chapter, I will refer to Turner's station as WTCG. Turner changed the station's name to WTBS in 1979, and then to TBS in 1987. Each name change reflected an effort to convey the station's increased national prominence. Because my interest in WTCG rests in its identity as a UHF-turned-superstation, my consistent reference to the call numbers WTCG will serve as an intentional reminder of the station's origins throughout this case study.

It has been a central tenet of this dissertation that critics and reporters may be distinguished by the extent to which they issue subjective opinions in their writing. In this chapter, I emphasize the distinction more firmly to juxtapose the different ways critics and reporters examined the emergence of WTCG as a satellite superstation. Journalists may pursue objective reporting, but their writing nevertheless contains ideological underpinnings that shapes their writing. This is a particularly urgent point for scholars who reference journalistic sources in their histories because the voice of the critic features a useful challenge the more celebratory discussion of technological change found in more “objective” journalistic accounts. As I examine below, journalists employed a series of tropes to explain why the superstation was important to report as news, including the great man thesis, the battle metaphor, and the ideology of the fourth network. The tropes functioned to simplify the complexity of technological development while also providing shape and interest to the narrative of the superstation. Because these tropes recurred across the papers featured in this study, they document a tendency among journalists to buy into the rhetoric of the “super” station. More importantly, these tropes obscured important nuances and over-ascribed the agency and power of individual figures or segments of the television industry. In the first subsection of this chapter below, I will provide examples of journalistic reporting about satellites and the superstation, examining the operation of the tropes and highlighting the drawbacks to this rhetoric. Critics’ voices will be featured more prominently in the second subsection to mark their alternative approach to reporting the superstation.

As a historical source, critical discourse provides a deeper insight and alternative perspective into the stakes of prominent technological contemporary discourses as they unfolded. Because critics framed their discussions of new technologies from a historical perspective, they

exposed common anxieties that continually circulate, then and now, around television and its impact. These anxieties range from the concerns of incumbent businesses that technology could destabilize their practices to the concerns of audiences accustomed to receiving television for free over the airwaves. As with the PTAR case study in chapter three, critical discourse serves as a useful intervention into prominent technological discourses by always returning attention back to programming—a topic that otherwise tends to become obscured in celebratory discussions of technological change.

Critical discourse exposes a disjuncture between theoretical technological discourse—the utopian imagining of possible uses—and applied discussions of technology in use. On the one hand, theoretical discussions of imagined technological use may center on how technological tools can provide solutions to longstanding problems. For instance, the satellite inspired a discussion of how it could break the broadcast networks' tight control over distribution, perhaps opening the television market to more diverse and experimental programming.<sup>6</sup> On the other hand, applied discussions of technology are more likely to examine the limits to those technological possibilities. This chapter, therefore, will examine more closely the divide between the imagined and actual use of the satellite as a television distribution tool, identifying the critic as a possible bridge between the two ways of conceiving of media technologies.

The study of the critic as a site fits comfortably within established cultural studies of media technologies. We see that in the 1970s critics adopted a similar approach to technological studies as media scholars, accounting for broader industrial structures and practices that shaped and limited the use of potentially transformative technologies. As Lisa Gitelman observes in *Always Already New: Media, History, and the Data of Culture*, which examines the parallels

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<sup>6</sup> Ted Friedman's *Electric Dreams: Computers in American Culture* examines more deeply the transformative potential of utopian technological discourses. Ted. E. Friedman, *Electric Dreams: Computers in American Culture* (New York: New York University Press, 2005).



between the inception of the phonograph in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and the arrival of the Internet in the late twentieth century: “The introduction of new media...is never entirely revolutionary: new media are less points of epistemic rupture than they are socially embedded sites for the ongoing negotiation of meaning as such.”<sup>7</sup> Similarly, the superstation was deeply embedded—in the established Atlanta television industry, under the Federal Communication Commission’s [FCC] purview as a licensed UHF station, in the community of growing independent channels, and in Turner’s vision for the future of his station. All of these industrial contexts shaped WTCG’s transformation into a satellite superstation. WTCG was at once old and new media, local and national, mediocre and profound. Critics are one way to view this hybrid identity on display. As a result, the story of WTCG as told by critics was less that of the transformative power of technology and more the limits placed upon technology by policy, industry, and culture.

The satellite superstation has been selected as the case study for this chapter because its story connects to some of the biggest technological developments for television at that time and through the next two decades: cable and satellite distribution. It also exposes ongoing debates about the revolutionary potential of these technologies. For example, despite the satellite’s capacity to revolutionize the structure of distribution within the TV industry, it instead became a tool of cable businesses to facilitate their own growth within the industry. WTCG serves as an ideal topic to study hybridity because it sheds light on the dependencies between cable and satellite, two distinct technologies that often operated in tandem. In addition, WTCG was a UHF station, part of the band of spectrum considered at that time to be second-class to the more widely used Very High Frequency [VHF] band. The superstation overcame the limitations of its position on the UHF band through satellite distribution. Ted Turner’s creative approach to

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<sup>7</sup> Lisa Gitelman, *Always Already New: Media, History, and the Data of Culture* (Cambridge: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 2006). 6.

distribution almost immediately eliminated WTCG's inferiority, at least in terms of its signal and reach, and others followed his example.<sup>8</sup>

The superstation has been overlooked as a site of analysis within media scholarly discourse. Apart from histories of cable that consider the superstation as a subset of cable,<sup>9</sup> the most prominent work about satellites can be found in Lisa Parks' *Cultures in Orbit*.<sup>10</sup> Parks' work examines the satellite as a global communications device and televisual technology. She focuses on contributing to a theory of televisuality through her look at these devices. This chapter instead offers a grounded consideration of how the superstation emerged, how it operated, and how its exploitation of the satellite enhanced its impact. While there were many potential uses of satellites apart from television distribution, the possibilities for use within the TV industry narrowed quickly over the course of the 1970s, as the three broadcast networks largely abstained from satellite exploration and new entrants exploited it in particular ways. This case study details the emergence of WTCG as a superstation within the context of its hybrid nature as a UHF station, a cable channel, and a national advertising vehicle. The larger story of WTCG developed here traces how truly utopian visions must account for the ways established businesses may themselves subvert and redirect the imagined uses of technology to reinforce their dominance.

Critics serve as a valuable source of information about the development of media technologies. They are figures that may be accounted for according to the framework of David

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<sup>8</sup> WTCG remains unique as the only intentional superstation. The common carrier with whom Turner partnered to distribute his station picked up other independent stations signals across the U.S., but these station, including WGN, did not control this use of their signal.

<sup>9</sup> See also Megan Mullen, *Television in the Multichannel Age: A Brief History of Cable Television* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2008); Parsons, *Blue Skies: A History of Cable Television*.

<sup>10</sup> Lisa Parks, *Cultures in Orbit: Satellites and the Televisual* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005).

Nye's *Technology Matters: Questions to Live With*.<sup>11</sup> He describes technology as deeply embedded within culture, employed as a tool according to the needs and anxieties of that culture.<sup>12</sup> Nye posited that the meaning of technology was inseparable from the stories that surround it. For the purposes of my study, critical voices were one factor in the productive discourse about the superstation's place within the established television industry. As journalists, critics created a detailed description of how technologies evolved, when they were halted, why they operated as they did.<sup>13</sup> With their eye on the industry and their desire to describe new media uses for their audience of readers, critics acted at once as historians, instructors, and TV technologists. Critics were not immune to the allure of expecting new tools to improve the weaker elements of television. With the second-generation critics reflected here, they had grown up with television and had followed the medium through some its most profound historical moments—coverage of astronauts on the moon, the Nixon impeachment hearings, and Vietnam. For these critics, television had become more than an entertainment medium, and their expectations for the ways television could inform, educate, and move its audience were often quite high. The fact that critics tended to be unimpressed with the superstation at this historical moment, while their counterparts at the newspaper—staff reporters—frequently fell prey to more idealistic descriptions of the revolutionary potential of new technologies, demands more investigation. In the following case study of the satellite superstation, I will trace the journalistic

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<sup>11</sup> David E. Nye, *Technology Matters: Questions to Live With* (Cambridge: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 2006).

<sup>12</sup> See also the following excellent examples of cultural histories of media include Douglas, *Inventing American Broadcasting, 1899-1922*; Carol Marvin, *When Old Technologies Were New: Thinking About Electronic Communication in the Late Nineteenth Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988); Friedman, *Electric Dreams: Computers in American Culture*; Jonathan Sterne, *The Audible Past: Cultural Origins of Sound Reproduction* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003).

<sup>13</sup> I am referencing here Brian Winston's revisionist history of the development of communication technologies, in which he proposed an "examination of the operation of the accelerators and brakes, or social necessities and constraints, rather than on the performance of technology considered *in vacuo*." Brian Winston, *Media Technology and Society: A History from the Telegraph to the Internet*. (New York: Routledge, 1998). 15.

and critical conversation about the superstation separately to reveal their distinctive contributions to a larger conversation about the transformative power of technology.<sup>14</sup>

#### 4.1 *A Brief History of Domestic Satellite Television Distribution in the United States*

In 1945, science fiction author Arthur C. Clarke developed a vision of a geo-stationary satellite that would facilitate communication across the planet by reaching into the skies.<sup>15</sup> At that time, his vision was indeed merely fiction. Yet when Clarke spoke to an assemblage of broadcasters at the annual National Association of Broadcasters [NAB] meeting in 1970, his fiction was in the process of becoming a reality.<sup>16</sup> In his speech about the long-range potential of satellite communications, he warned broadcasters, “If you take me too seriously, you’ll go broke...but if your sons don’t take me seriously enough, they’ll go broke.”<sup>17</sup> In 1970, then, Clarke cautioned that the satellite was not ready to be a full replacement for current methods of distribution. Nonetheless, he did foresee that within a generation, satellites would become the key to television distribution. President Richard Nixon ended years of anticipation for the future of communications by introducing an “open skies” policy in January 1970, drafted by his Staff Assistant Clay T. Whitehead. The policy officially launched a competitive domestic satellite

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<sup>14</sup> Home Box Office [HBO] was the first television channel to realize the distribution potential of RCA’s Satcom as a primary means of program distribution. I am not discussing HBO here, however, because it always existed as a new entrant, as an alternate programming source from over-the-air [OTA] television. The superstation’s hybrid nature made it a better fit for a case study of critical technological discourse. Also, scholars have discussed HBO and its history a good deal, while the history of the superstation has been less developed.

<sup>15</sup> Charles Leroux, “TV Satellites are Bringing the Space Age Home,” *Chicago Tribune*, February 24 1981.

<sup>16</sup> Clarke spoke to broadcasters in 1970 at the moment when it seemed the satellite was finally starting to deliver on some of its promise for the TV industry after repeated delays during the last decade. In the 1960s, satellites were on the verge of fruition and generated the sort of utopian discourse that often accompanies new technologies. Indecision by government, however, prevented the full realization of satellite use within the broadcasting industry during the 1960s.

<sup>17</sup> “Satellite: From a Toy to ‘Salvation,’” *Variety*, April 8 1970.

program in the U.S.<sup>18</sup> Two months later, the FCC issued a Report and Order to establish its authority over the licensing of domestic communications systems.<sup>19</sup> By 1973, the FCC had established its satellite policy in a divided 4-3 vote for a “multiple entry” approach,<sup>20</sup> inviting any applicants with the resources (money) and means (technological knowledge) to apply for a license to launch and control a satellite in space.<sup>21</sup> During the 1970s, broadcasters, cablecasters, advertisers, and new entrants to the business of television struggled to determine how deeply to invest themselves in the potentially transformative technology of satellite television, particularly the satellite superstation.

The satellite superstation threatened to disrupt the fundamental logic that built the structure and operations of the American television industry.<sup>22</sup> Broadcast in the U.S.—dominated by three distribution networks that distributed programming over the air to the FCC-licensed, locally-based affiliate television stations—developed in the 1920s in part to overcome the

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<sup>18</sup> Whitehead would later become the head of a new federal agency called the Office of Telecommunications Policy, which served as an enforcer of Nixon’s policy but also found itself awkwardly positioned between the FCC, the courts, and Congress. The OTP lost power after Nixon’s impeachment and was disbanded in 1978.

<sup>19</sup> Allen Cooper, “Whitehead White House White Paper May ‘Move Heaven & Earth’ For Nets Tell Plans on Satellite Distribution,” *Variety*, September 16 1970.

<sup>20</sup> One reason the FCC vote was so divided involved a disagreement about the extent to which AT&T and Comsat should have their role with satellites limited or enhanced since both were considered uniquely prepared to launch to satellite age.

<sup>21</sup> Larry Michie, “Ameribird May Soar in 1973,” *Variety*, June 21 1972.

<sup>22</sup> Instead of pursuing a radical shift in distribution method, the networks employed the threat of a shift to satellite as a negotiating tool with incumbent distribution facilitator AT&T. In 1969, AT&T threatened to raise their distribution rates for the broadcast networks, so the networks contemplated replacing their expensive system of distribution through short-range over-the-air [OTA] transmission and longer-range AT&T wire-based transmission. Among the attractions of shifting from AT&T to satellite was an anticipated enormous cost savings—a study by Page Communications claimed that the networks could save 30% of their distribution costs by firing AT&T and shifting to the distribution power of a satellite. Jack Gould, “Networks Will Discuss Satellite As Way to End A.T.&T. Costs,” *New York Times*, February 12 1970; “Satellite: From a Toy to ‘Salvation’.” Once AT&T rolled back their increases, however, the networks stepped down their interest in immediate satellite experimentation. When they had the opportunity to file with the FCC for a license to operate a satellite, all three networks abstained. The example of the networks demonstrates how incumbent powers often treat new technologies—as an innovative asset employed to solidify and improve their established position as the leaders of American broadcasting.

technological limitation that over-the air [OTA] television transmissions could not exceed 70 miles or so (with UHF signals reaching only 40 miles).<sup>23</sup> The network-dominated system of television was not “natural” or inevitable, therefore, because the structure grew to facilitate national distribution through the interconnection of a series of individual television stations. When Ted Turner built a new organizational structure in which an independent station partnered with a satellite common carrier and cable companies to distribute an independent station’s programming nationally, his superstation disrupted the logic of the industry that depended on the networks for national distribution.<sup>24</sup> The superstation not only achieved national penetration but also bypassed all the structures that had long controlled television distribution in the U.S.: the networks, the affiliated stations, and AT&T.<sup>25</sup> Satellite distribution rendered void the necessity

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<sup>23</sup> A second limitation that shaped the network-affiliate structure was regulatory: the RCA agreement of 1919 prohibited AT&T from playing a role in the developing broadcasting production industry. To overcome these limitations, AT&T developed what they called “toll broadcasting,” a system through which AT&T offered time on its station WEAf for producers and performers to lease and program. AT&T then distributed the programming through their extensive telephone wires to connect a series of radio stations (establishing network of stations that carried these programs). RCA protested AT&T’s back-door entrance into station operation, and a judge agreed that AT&T did not hold exclusive rights to its telephone lines. RCA acquired WEAf and AT&T stepped out of broadcasting again, but the concept of networking a group of stations and distributing programming from a central hub persisted. For an example of one UHF station’s efforts to improve the strength of its signal the old fashioned way—through an antenna, see Howard Rosenberg, “KCET’s Power to be Tripled,” *Los Angeles Times*, July 19 1978.

<sup>24</sup> From 22,300 feet in the earth’s atmosphere, a satellite can beam a program to multiple points throughout the U.S. at one time. Satellite distribution therefore cuts down significantly on time (instant delivery), equipment (no requirement for a system of wires that stretched across the nation), and cost (for the long-line charges imposed by AT&T were the networks’ second-most costly expense, after program costs). “Comsat Aide Sees Interconnected National CATV In A Satellite Era,” *Variety*, April 21 1971.). “How Satellites Save,” *Variety*, February 1 1978.

<sup>25</sup> Consider this estimate of costs for an Atlanta station to pick up a Kansas City Royals game played 750 miles away—the cost using AT&T would be \$3,185.50, while satellite distribution would demand as low as \$1,486.50. “How Satellites Save.” AT&T charged a rate of 75c per mile (plus the \$500 tariff to loop the local Atlanta signal to the long-lines by master control and another \$500 to loop the feed to the local station signal at the K.C. end), so that is where the \$3,185.50 figure comes from. Via satellite, the total cost came to only \$1,486.50 (or \$2,319.00 if the stations did not already have satellite-receive capability).

of the network-affiliate dependency, yet the networks nevertheless continue to operate today.<sup>26</sup>

The story of the superstation did not become one of revolution but rather incorporation.

#### 4.2 *The Superstation as Hybrid: WTCG-TV, Ted Turner, and the Limits of Metaphor*

“How does a television station in Atlanta—and one that consistently gets the poorest ratings of the four channels in its home city—end up in more than three million American homes, many of which are thousands of miles from its transmitter?” ~A Business Reporter, *Washington Post*, 1979<sup>27</sup>

WTCG had first come to the airwaves first as WJRJ in 1967. Having inherited his father’s struggling billboard business, a young, ambitious businessman named R.E. “Ted” Turner had turned the company around by 1969 and was looking for a new challenge.<sup>28</sup> In 1970, Turner purchased WJRJ, a station that was in debt and in fifth place out of five local Atlanta stations, and renamed it WTCG after his company, Turner Communications Group.<sup>29</sup> WTCG was a UHF station, which meant it struggled against the long-term challenges facing all UHF’s—their signals were not as strong as those in the VHF range of the spectrum and many older television sets had not been designed to pick up the UHF band at all. In October 1975, Turner announced his plan to distribute his signal by satellite, and in December 1976, he had done just that.

A series of feature stories about Ted Turner presented him as a great man who transformed television. Turner made for good copy in print publications throughout the 1970s.

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<sup>26</sup> “Cable Entering Satellite & Superstation Era,” *Variety*, November 16 1977. Satellite distribution works as follows: an earth-based transmission station picks up the stations’ signal from the air and beams it to a satellite (like RCA’s Satcom I). From the satellite, the signal can be transmitted on a new frequency to receiving earth stations across in the nation, and from there the signal is translated for cable distribution.

<sup>27</sup> Auerbach, “Satellite, Cable Systems: Superstations Making Waves in TV Industry.”

<sup>28</sup> Darrell Simmons, “Another Score by Channel 17,” *Atlanta Journal*, February 2 1973.

<sup>29</sup> The joke goes that WTCG moved to fourth place only when another local independent failed. Undeterred, Turner developed for the station the slogan “What This Channel Grow.”

His daring was perhaps best depicted by an anecdote from an *Atlanta Journal* profile of Turner in 1977.<sup>30</sup> During a sailing race, Turner saw a tugboat ahead pulling a load—with the wire connecting the two standing between Turner’s ship and the finish line. Turner doubled down and continued on course. The tugboat released its line, and Turner sailed through with ease. This story’s wider applications to the narrative of Turner are many—from “Ted makes his own rules,” to a cautionary tale, “when in a staring contest with Ted Turner, don’t expect him to blink first.” Turner therefore appeared in newspaper articles as a genius and a rebel. Turner also became known for rarely preparing for public statements; his off-the-cuff remarks tended to be bold, colorful, even a bit naughty. For example, when talking with an *Atlanta Journal* sports reporter about the fact that he had five children, Turner explained, “the only thing that’s not harmful in life is making love.”<sup>31</sup> With comments like that, it is no wonder Turner appeared in print so often.

The stories about WTCG in print publications put Turner at the center of the stories, subsuming the broader implications of the superstation’s arrival within their celebration of Turner as media giant. Journalists regularly played up Turner’s bad-boy past, his repeated successes with hopeless causes like WTCG, and his business acumen. Consider the hyperbole of a sports reporter for the *Los Angeles Times* who demonstrated the euphoria conveyed by visions of Turner as the Messiah of technological change: “Twenty years from now when television channels may be as plentiful as radio stations are today, they’ll talk about the old days of television when three networks dictated what Americans could see—the days before the cable explosion. And they’ll talk about the man most responsible, a flamboyant sports entrepreneur,

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<sup>30</sup> Minshew and Rogers, “A Winner: The Brash New Kid in Atlanta Sports,” 1A.

<sup>31</sup> Hopkins, “Turner Makes Ch. 17 Work with Sports.”



Ted Turner.”<sup>32</sup> Journalistic focus on Turner made for a great read, but it overestimated Turner’s innovation by failing to account for the established business models that facilitated Turner’s ambition.

The superstation revolution was more of an evolution than an innovation, with WTCG pulling from the example of many forebears, including other independent stations and the distribution practices of the emerging cable industry. Turner did not come up with the idea to transform WTCG into a station overnight, and he based his model for national distribution on the already-established interconnections of the emerging cable industry. By the mid 1970s, Turner had expanded WTCG into a regional station reaching across the American south by licensing it to nearby cable companies. Moreover, he carefully cultivated his relationship with cable companies, providing program guides and marketing materials to boost the prominence of WTCG.<sup>33</sup> Cable scholar Megan Mullen has written about the necessity of understanding cable from its early development. In addition, she has called into question the emphasis upon Turner’s “invention” of the superstation: “[Ted Turner] was by no means the first television entrepreneur to realize that major-market independent stations held a huge potential for inclusion in cable-delivered programming packages.”<sup>34</sup> The attention to Turner’s satellite therefore obscured the fact that his station’s distribution depended on an established system of cable television

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<sup>32</sup> Larry Stewart, "A Bonanza Awaits the Sports Junkie: But It's a Bonanza That Has a Built-in Hitch," *Los Angeles Times*, May 25 1979.

<sup>33</sup> Auerbach, "Satellite, Cable Systems: Superstations Making Waves in TV Industry." In October 1975, Turner announced his intention to deliver WTCG’s signal to a satellite for national distribution. He then moved quickly. Turner purchased an earth station for \$650,000 from Sidney Topol, the president of Atlanta-based Atlanta Scientific, and he secured a corporate license to operate that satellite for \$70,000 from the FCC under the name Southern Satellite Systems. Williams, "Super Station’s Super Man." When Turner learned that it was illegal for a broadcaster to transmit a satellite signal, he sold Southern Satellite Systems for \$1 to his friend Edward Taylor, who had experience in the satellite industry, and Taylor then operated that company as a common carrier in compliance with the FCC’s regulations. Stewart, "A Bonanza Awaits the Sports Junkie: But It's a Bonanza That Has a Built-in Hitch."

<sup>34</sup> Megan Mullen, "Distant Signals from the Future: A Case Study of Eastern Microwave and Its Operations in the Northeast During Cable's Pre-Satellite Era," *Quarterly Review of Film and Video* 16, no. 3-4 (1999): 319.

companies connected by wires.

Just as Turner's superstation "innovation" adopted the framework of the cable industry established by entrepreneurs before him, he also followed the example of pay television companies who built their operations from a UHF station. Large cities in the 1970s were often the last to be wired for cable, a technology developed in remote mountain regions.<sup>35</sup> Though unwired, cities did sometimes attract companies like SelecTV in Los Angeles that offered subscription pay television. They did so by delivering programming through a scrambled OTA signal.<sup>36</sup> Turner's WTCG therefore followed the example of UHF's which had already been partially incorporated into a pay cable system.

Turner was the public face of WTCG, and as a result, it was his personality that was reported by journalists most often in the nation's print publication. The attention Turner attracted in the press is one of the reasons WTCG became so prominent. In the most detailed article about Turner in the *Washington Post*, reporter Christian Williams<sup>37</sup> compared Turner to Captain Kirk, Alexander the Great, and Errol Flynn—great men, all.<sup>38</sup> Of Turner, Williams writes, "The one-on-one Turner is a dizzying mixture of fierce pride, non-stop high-decibel speechmaking, philosophical gloom, nightmarish evocations of a ruined earth populated by homo sapiens gone to seed, utter candor, and a sense of personal destiny that is virtually overwhelming."<sup>39</sup> This run of descriptors, as if a barrage of adjectives was the only way to encapsulate the hybrid nature of Turner himself, was not unusual for journalists covering WTCG during this time. Describing

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<sup>35</sup> Cities like Chicago, with a relatively flat topography, enjoyed excellent OTA reception, making cable TV less of a priority. Also, wiring the city proved very difficult and expensive, requiring a number of releases from government and private companies to lay wire underground or to attach to buildings.

<sup>36</sup> The systems sent out an encoded signal that required a decoder box on the receiving end to view the programming.

<sup>37</sup> Williams would later work as a screenwriter for television, including *Hill Street Blues* and *Hercules*.

<sup>38</sup> Williams, "Super Station's Super Man," M3. Turner tells Williams that the term he prefers be used to describe him is the name of his boat—tenacious.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, M1.

Turner for a cover story for the *Atlanta Journal* in January 1977, two journalists portrayed Turner as the master of contradictions: "He is always 'on.' He is also emotional, sensitive, loud, profane, brash, impulsive, sentimental, egotistical, hyperactive (he can't talk without pacing) and has long fueled himself with the old 'wine, women and song' cliché."<sup>40</sup> Not all reports about Turner were so effusive,<sup>41</sup> and some were downright snarky,<sup>42</sup> but the mere fact of such attention to this owner of a UHF station in a medium-sized market affirmed the value of a big personality in the TV business, transforming Turner's evolution into a revolution through his charm and bravado alone.<sup>43</sup>

Television discourse cannot be contained within the culture section of the newspaper, and with the satellite superstation, the journalists most prone to idealize Turner as an innovator were sports writers. WTCG built its schedule upon the foundation of sports programming. It featured baseball, basketball, hockey, and a number of regional college football games. Turner bought the Atlanta Braves baseball team for less than \$10 million dollars in 1976, and then purchased the Atlanta Hawks basketball team the following year. As the owner, he not only had many hours of sports programming to air but he also did not have to haggle over license fees. Because of the importance of sports for Turner, who was also a champion yachtsman, metaphors of winning and losing inflected discussions of him. Turner fit the narrative for sports: defeating the odds, refusing to quit, and ultimately, winning, at whatever cost.

To win, though, Turner needed an obstacle to overcome, and he often positioned the

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<sup>40</sup> Minshew and Rogers, "A Winner: The Brash New Kid in Atlanta Sports," 1A.

<sup>41</sup> Peter Gammons, "Baseball Shudders at Cost of Turner's Open-Wallet Policy," *Los Angeles Times*, December 10 1980.

<sup>42</sup> Morrie Gelman, "Superstation WTCG: Advertisers Ho-Hum," *Variety*, February 15 1978.

<sup>43</sup> Williams' mentions other members of the Turner team, including Sid Topol (owner of Southern Atlantic, the company which sold Turner his satellite receiving dishes) and Don Lachowski (Turner's Vice President of Sales). These men rarely earn the same sort of accolades garnered by Turner, though one imagines he could not achieve his goals without them.

broadcast networks as his enemy. A journalist writing about Turner's use of sports to build the appeal of WTCG described as evidence of Turner's "swagger" that "he respects the Big 3, but he's not awed by them."<sup>44</sup> Journalists declared that Turner not only refused to kowtow to network power, he was at times downright ornery towards it. One syndicated article appearing in the *Chicago Tribune* quoted Turner referring to the networks as dinosaurs. He chided, "You know why they're not here any more. Because the mammals ate their eggs. I'm a mammal."<sup>45</sup> For journalists, the battle metaphor simplified their description of the superstation's impact on the structure of the television industry by translating a complex system of networks, affiliates, O&Os, producers, independent stations, among other, into a binary of Turner versus the networks.

"Turner as great man challenging the oppressive power of the networks" played well in the media environment of the 1970s. As discussed in chapter 3, the 1970s featured a strong regulatory impulse to limit the power of the three networks, advanced through policies like the PTAR in the first half of the 1970s. When the FCC's agenda shifted towards deregulation in the second half of the 1970s, the commission's efforts to facilitate the expansion of cable served as a balance on the network oligopoly. Add to this the Department of Justice's antitrust suit against the networks, and you have an industrial climate bristling with antagonism towards the networks, an antagonism that Turner adopted with aplomb to serve his own advancement. Turner's anti-network rhetoric was not only consistent with the broader discourse of the decade, it also formed a bridge between the FCC's dying regulatory agenda and its new enthusiasm for deregulation. Whatever the problems with the television industry, the networks served as handy bad guys for

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<sup>44</sup> Hopkins, "Turner Makes Ch. 17 Work with Sports."

<sup>45</sup> Von Hoffman, "Cable TV threatens networks."

Turner and for journalists writing stories about the technological transformation underway.<sup>46</sup>

The battle and great man tropes oversimplified the structure of the broadcasting industry and obscured the individual priorities for different stakeholders in the TV business. Though reporters may have adopted tropes for narrative clarity, these tropes carried with them a variety of meaningful associations and also obscured deeper complexities within the operations of the television industry. For Turner, operating a second-class UHF station, satellite distribution extended WTCG's signal reach across the nation, a power that only networks possessed formerly. Yet it was not the networks that Turner competed with most directly on cable television. Turner had other forms of competition, including the other superstations like Chicago's WGN-TV, considered one of the best-programmed UHF stations in the nation and first distributed by satellite in 1978.<sup>47</sup> Significantly, Turner did not compete with the owners of WGN-TV directly because the Chicago station was an unintentional superstation, with its signal picked up by a common carrier and distributed to cable systems without its permission. Turner nevertheless competed for priority carriage on cable systems choosing between his intentional superstation and a range of other unintentional ones.<sup>48</sup>

The battle metaphors were also problematic because they implied that a victor would emerge from the conflict between WTCG and a host of opponents, from the networks to unintentional superstations to independents that continued to distribute their signal over the air. Ted Friedman's work presents an alternative framing for the conflicts prompted by new media technologies like the superstation. He argues in *Electric Dreams: Computer in American Culture* that technological determinism may be read as a dialectic rather than as a teleological theory.

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<sup>46</sup> I should note that because Turner conflates the networks, I am doing so as well. This is not a suggestion that the networks were a monolith but rather that the discourse frames them as such.

<sup>47</sup> Gary Deeb, "Cultural-historical Shows Highlight WGN Lineup," *Chicago Tribune*, September 6 1974.

<sup>48</sup> Other unintentional superstations included WOR-TV in New York and KTVU in San Francisco.

This means that the focus should be on the tension between new and old rather than on the end goal of one party defeating the other.<sup>49</sup> For Friedman, a dialectic provides an opportunity to highlight the utopian potential within media technologies because something new is created from the conflict of two opposing forces. A dialectic's energy comes from the conflict, so the more profound challenge posed by WTCG was not its potential for victory but rather for how it made visible the tensions operating throughout the TV industry. The battle metaphor was essentially focused on subtraction—one side would defeat the other. Yet it was the conflict itself, among a variety of stakeholders, which opened opportunities for rethinking the structure of the industry, so the battle metaphor asked the wrong question by focusing on winners and losers. As the ultimate paradox, a hybrid station, WTCG as a superstation urged a reconsideration of how power circulated and was diffused throughout the television industry to account for the variety of players brought into conflict in distinct ways.

Another trope offered by journalists concentrated less upon subtraction and more upon addition by describing WTCG as a possible fourth network. The term “fourth network” has a long pre-history stemming from the original fourth network contenders, radio's Mutual Broadcasting Company and television's DuMont Network.<sup>50</sup> In its most literal meaning, a fourth network would be an equal rival of the three broadcast networks, sharing their national reach, formal relationships with affiliates, and responsibility for producing a variety of program types for a full week of primetime programming. But the term also has been applied more loosely to refer to stations with only one of the criteria, including stations with national reach in terms of distribution prowess or stations with interests in producing original programming for syndicated

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<sup>49</sup> Friedman, *Electric Dreams: Computers in American Culture*.

<sup>50</sup> The long contemporary history of fourth network Fox may be connected to DuMont through Metromedia, a company that helped both networks exist.

distribution.<sup>51</sup> In the 1960s and 1970s, there were several contenders to the “fourth network” title, including various incarnations of educational/non-commercial television, some Metromedia-led collaborations with advertising agencies, and Operation Primetime, a collective effort by a series of independent stations to produce and distribute original programming.<sup>52</sup> WTCG may be considered just one more among several failed efforts to develop the structure for a sustainable fourth network, but the focus of the discussion below will be on how the discourse of the fourth network inherently limited the transformative potential of satellite-enabled WTCG.

As with the journalistic framing of Turner as battling all-powerful networks, the fourth network discourse derived its power from contemporary political anxieties about network hegemony. For instance, the White House’s Clay Whitehead, chief of the Office of Telecommunications Policy, commented in 1973 that he’d be happy to see a fourth, fifth, and sixth network. All of the companies that expressed aspirations to the fourth network position within the industry became embedded within a set of expectations for a more competitive industry. Hopes for a viable competitor to the Big Three were dashed considerably when a report from the Rand Corporation, released in 1974, found that the establishment of a fourth network was economically unfeasible. The report examined several possible means to create a fourth network, including uniting the various independent stations, reorganizing the current network-affiliate relationships through divestiture and reassignment, and extending the penetration of

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<sup>51</sup> Norman Lear’s successful station-by-station syndication of *Mary Hartman, Mary Hartman* in the late 1970s inspired some fourth network talk.

<sup>52</sup> Lee Margulies, “Networks: And Then There Were Four?,” *Los Angeles Times*, January 31 1977. The latter example, Operation Primetime, featured a collaboration of 21 different independent stations, including three passive superstations: WGN-TV Chicago, WPIX-TV New York, and KTVU-TV Oakland. OPT earned a good deal of attention from the press, but the fact that several passive superstations were trying to extend their reach nationally through traditional means did not play a part of the discussion.

cable television.<sup>53</sup> Rand researcher Rolla Edwards Park posited that a fourth network would need \$100 million over its program costs to survive.<sup>54</sup> Significantly, the report did not consider a satellite-distributed network as a possibility.<sup>55</sup> The discourse of the fourth network continued, nevertheless. In 1976, FCC Commissioner Abbott Washburn celebrated the first satellite transmission of WTCG by saying, “it could turn out to be the first step on the road to a fourth network.”<sup>56</sup> For some journalists and industry figures, WTCG seemed a contender to become a fourth network, and after the Rand report, this made the ambitions of Turner’s station even more impressive.<sup>57</sup>

Inscribing WTCG within the fourth network ideology exposed the most troubling aspect of these types of narrative tropes—those journalists and industry figures who expressed them imbricated WTCG within the well-established structure of the TV industry. This move represented an overlay rather than a transformation, a fourth network became a competitor of the Big Three but did not undermine their control of programming and distribution. Turner himself boasted that WTCG could become a fourth network, and by advancing this discourse, he missed

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<sup>53</sup> Cable reached large urban centers in the final years of the 1970s and early 1980s, gaining footholds in Chicago, Washington D.C., and elsewhere.

<sup>54</sup> Alexander Auerbach, "Among the Media: A 4th Network Wouldn't Pay Off," *Los Angeles Times*, January 6 1974.

<sup>55</sup> The Rand Corporation released the report in 1974, before Turner announced his intention to distribute WTCG by satellite. The fact that the report was out of date within two years documents how quickly the media industries may move, rendering void years of research through new technologies or innovative programming strategies. When the report tried to account for advertiser-supported cable, it could not calculate an income great enough for the cable system to serve as a viable competitor for free, OTA television. Pay cable without advertisers support, like Home Box Office, launched in 1972, also did not factor into the report.

<sup>56</sup> "Atlanta TV Goes National Via Satellite," *Broadcasting*, December 20 1976, 24-25. A rival term, “fourth market,” appeared in *Variety* during the same month as this *Variety* article, but journalists did not incorporate the term into common usage, despite its value as a referent to the function of television serving as a market for advertisers

<sup>57</sup> "Channel 17 Curbs Sought," *Atlanta Journal*, August 26 1977.



an opportunity to radically reconceive what a true competitor for the Big Three networks could look like because he defined his station's future according to their terms.<sup>58</sup>

Turner also sustained the most fundamental fact of American television—its business model as an advertising medium. The economic structure established by Turner positioned WTCG as dependent upon advertising revenue because he offered his channel's signal for free to a satellite common carrier, planning to raise ad rates later to reflect the larger, national audience. WTCG's common carrier, Southern Satellite Systems Inc., then sold the WTCG lineup for ten cents per subscriber, up to \$2,000 per month.<sup>59</sup> Offering the signal of WTCG for free to a satellite common carrier may have accelerated the station's expansion—indeed, WTCG had an audience reach of 400,000 within metro Atlanta in 1974 but then achieved a reach of three million homes in 45 states by 1979 through its relationship with cable and satellite distribution businesses.<sup>60</sup> Yet WTCG, in the end, did not challenge the fundamental structures of the television industry. For all his talk of wanting to do something different, Turner put himself at the mercy of advertisers, asking them to accept the higher ad rates he imposed in January 1979. In one of his “pitch” talks to advertisers, Turner pleaded, “The people that buy the advertising that sponsor programs on television ‘are the only things that stand between the forces of darkness and forces of light.’”<sup>61</sup> Rather than reconceive how satellites may have empowered WTCG to form a new basis of revenue growth, Turner portrayed advertisers as the light in a world of darkness. Journalists naturalized Turner's depiction of the partnership between the superstation and national advertisers, despite the fact that Turner actually had to work quite hard to convince advertisers to get on board. Marketing reporter Elizabeth Brenner noted that advertiser support

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<sup>58</sup> Stewart, "A Bonanza Awaits the Sports Junkie: But It's a Bonanza That Has a Built-in Hitch."

<sup>59</sup> "Superstation Breakthrough," *Broadcasting*, October 30 1978.

<sup>60</sup> "Data on Superstation WTCG-TV," *Variety*, March 21 1979.

<sup>61</sup> Morrie Gelman, "Turner Blasts Net News in Pitch To L.A. Blurbers," *Variety*, March 19 1980.

was lagging for cable because no trusted audience measurement system had yet been constructed.<sup>62</sup> This sort of reporting perpetuated the convenient fiction that ratings were not only accurate but also that the television's industry must depend upon them to support its commercial ends.

As I describe in more detail in the next section, television critics, alternatively, countered the dominant narratives perpetuated by journalists in their discussions of Turner and WTCG. The *New York Times*' Les Brown, who has served in the past chapters as a sort of bridge figure between journalism and criticism due to his specialization in television industry reporting, examined in 1980 the superiority of the pay cable business model over the advertiser supported one: "The economics of pay television are tantalizing, compared with those of advertising-supported broadcasting. A program on the commercial networks that reaches 20 million people in prime time is deemed a failure. But a program on a pay-television network that enters five million households, each paying \$2 to receive it, has an instantaneous box office of \$10 million."<sup>63</sup> Brown's attention to ways the pay television model was exposing weaknesses of the advertising model upon which broadcasting had long depended cut through Turner's bravado about becoming a fourth network. It also made visible the ways his journalist colleagues reinscribed incumbent television business structures and operations in their reportage of Turner and WTCG.

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<sup>62</sup> Elizabeth Brenner, "Marketing: Cable TV in Infancy as Ad Revenooer [sic]," *Chicago Tribune*, November 23 1980.

<sup>63</sup> Les Brown, "From the Air: Programs By Satellite and Cable: ," *New York Times*, February 17 1980.

### 4.3 *Bringing the Superstation Back to Earth: Programs and the Unique Contributions of Critics to Technological Discourse*

In this section, I document two significant interventions into journalistic discourses about technology made by newspaper critics during the same years examined above, from 1975-1980. First, critics wrote through a their personal experience with television and their articles often considered television through the historical context of past moments of technological transformation (or lack thereof) through which they had lived. Critics often wrote from a place of relative skepticism, their deep familiarity with the persistence of the status quo within the television industry having inoculated them somewhat from utopian paradigms or promises of transformative technological change. Most importantly, critics were authorized to convey disappointment with the status quo, so their work necessarily featured a unique point of view from the journalistic accounts above. Second, critics prompted attention to the programs that aired on WTCG and other independents, both superstations and those not distributed by satellite. Critics often found they could not cover all the programs on television, so they tended to privilege the network primetime series and public television programs over independent stations. Turner's big personality, however, earned his WTCG unusual attention from critics, so an examination of critical discourse around WTCG provides historians with a way to learn more about independent station programming during the late 1970s.

Television critics reported technological news with much more caution than their staff reporter peers discussed above. They also evidenced a healthy cynicism towards change, conveying the view that neither the incumbent businesses nor the economic structures of the television industry would change in the future. At the *Washington Post*, critic Tom Shales compared doomsday predictions of the end of television to predictions that the printing press

would destroy conversation.<sup>64</sup> These critics downplayed and qualified the revolutionary rhetoric of their staff reporter peers, reminding readers of how often technology failed to generate genuine change.

Even when these critics employed a cynical tone or pithy writing style, the points they argued were practical and reflective of their deep knowledge of the TV industry. In 1979, the *Los Angeles Times*' Howard Rosenberg made light of the industry and journalistic rhetoric that foresaw profound change around the corner:

Making out your Christmas shopping list and running out of ideas? Don't despair. Neiman-Marcus is making available the gift to end all gifts in its 1979 Christmas catalogue. The only problem is that Santa may get a hernia bringing it to you. For the man or woman who has-literally-everything. His or her very own earth station... And best of all, it's a steal. Only \$36,500.<sup>65</sup>

Rosenberg used humor to document the incredible divide between technological promise and viewer experience—though satellite dishes existed and were operational (even advertised in a fancy catalog), the true transformation of viewing interaction with television had yet to become a real possibility.

In 1980, *Chicago Tribune* critic Ron Alridge posed a question as the title of one article: "Will Pay TV Deliver a Knockout Punch to the Networks?" He answered, in short, "No."<sup>66</sup> Cutting through all the talk about "the end of the networks," he argued that the incumbents would find a way to turn new media forms to their advantage, likely by displacing their public

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<sup>64</sup> Tom Shales, "There's No Hiding From It," *Washington Post*, January 7 1978.

<sup>65</sup> Howard Rosenberg, "Multisatellite TV for Multi Bucks," *Los Angeles Times*, October 16 1979. The FCC removed the license requirement for receiving dishes of a certain size in late 1979, so home satellite ownership became more common after this point.

<sup>66</sup> Ron Alridge, "Will Pay TV Deliver a Knockout Punch to the Networks?," *Chicago Tribune*, October 29 1980.

service responsibilities onto the “alternative” of cable. As described by Alridge, then, the networks viewed cable less as a threat than as a needed second market for alternative, niche programming.<sup>67</sup> Alridge maintained that change would emerge gradually, allowing the networks with time to adapt and to mold satellite and cable in ways that proved beneficial to them.

Cecil Smith, a first-generation television critic, spoke from years of experience when he issued a cautionary warning to readers about hyperbolic visions of future technological change:

I wonder if you remember that ten years ago when television was slithering out of the ‘60s into the ‘70s, forecasters were pronouncing the imminent doom of network-dominated commercial TV as we had known it...well, as you know, it didn’t happen, but as we now ooze our way into still another decade, the same sort of forecasts are appearing for the ‘80s.<sup>68</sup>

Smith wielded the authority of three decades of television history because he had written about all of them. In their individual ways, critics in the late 1970s served as the voice of reason in the reportage of new media technologies. Their work functioned as a corrective to the more embellished pieces by their non-critic colleagues.

Amidst all the talk of technological battlegrounds and the daring of great men, critics returned the conversation about televisual technology to programming. They employed their own metaphor to frame their engagement with television technology and its relationship to programming—a hardware/software binary. Software was a loaded term—it suggested an implicit relationship between the apparatus (hardware) and the programming (software) that emerged from it. One of the earliest of uses of the term “software” that I found was cited by

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<sup>67</sup> Public television also functioned as a sort of second market, airing foreign and highbrow programming more often than the networks, but PBS suffered from constant economic stress during the 1970s and therefore never developed into its full capacity as an alternative to network mass programming. There were overlaps between noncommercial and cable television in terms of programming, however.

<sup>68</sup> Cecil Smith, "Paramount: Hit TV Shows Keep Coming," *Los Angeles Times*, August 2 1979.

first-generation *New York Times* critic Jack Gould in 1970. He reacted to news that hardware manufacturer General Electric was shifting into TV production by noting that this could become a trend: “Indeed, the ‘software’ approach is not being ignored by others engaged in the manufacture of different types of ‘hardware.’ If some day there is a domestic satellite system linking cable systems in a network, there could be competition in many instances for the existing chains.”<sup>69</sup> Gould therefore understood that technological change would gradually be incorporated into the existing structure—the new entrants to the TV business would compete with established companies for the already-existing networks of stations.<sup>70</sup> Further, Gould accounted for the convergence of hardware and software production under one company masthead while also foreshadowing the conglomeration of cable systems enabled by satellite distribution—all without engaging in hyperbole. Having served as the NYT’s critic since 1944, Gould had a front-row seat to the birth of television, so he well knew that technological change operated through incorporation rather than through transformation of the media industries. Critics like Gould cut through utopian rhetoric with a carefully weighed vision of competition rather than transformation.

Gould’s work sharply diverged from the approach of *New York Times* sports reporter Jane Gross. In a 1979 piece in which she probed whether the superstation was a boon or a bane for professional sports, Gross began her piece with a brief reference to the fact that WOR-TV New York was now an unintentional superstation. Gross noted that the vice president of Madison Square Gardens was upset about WOR’s superstation status because his company had licensed

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<sup>69</sup> Jack Gould, "Television: New Money in the Pot," *New York Times*, December 20 1970.

<sup>70</sup> Gould mastered writing about TV as programs, industry, and technology. He also wrote in 1966 an early piece on how satellites would function within the communications market. Jack Gould, "Satellites as Communicators," *New York Times*, November 20 1966.

its sports content to WOR at a rate based on local ratings data alone.<sup>71</sup> She begins her piece with an acknowledgement of how the superstation de-stabilized industry economics. This mention aside, then, Gross devotes the rest of the article to conversation with an apologist of Ted Turner, William J. Donnolly, vice president for new electronic media at Young & Rubicam. Donnolly praised Turner: "This is what makes America great, these terribly imaginative, courageous guys." Donnolly continued, contending that there was no evidence that the superstation had hurt either the networks or sports teams. Gross never inserted her own voice to try to account for the radically different evaluation of the superstation's impact espoused by the vice president of Madison Square Gardens and the vice president of Young and Rubicam. Nor does she explain the professional stakes for Donnolly through any contextualization of his company's relationship with WTCG or other superstations. Gould's examination above, in contrast, contemplated the far-reaching implications of this one company's shift into production in a manner that deepened the relevance of his piece. This work therefore documented Gould's unique authority as a critic, empowered to offer subjective commentary even about such matters as technological change.

Gould wrote his piece in 1970, and as the decade progressed and the imagined uses of technologies including cable and satellite television became realities, critics examined more deeply a misperception about the link between hardware and software. In an interview with Bill Bratton of Theta Cable in 1978, TV reporter Lee Margulies of the *Los Angeles Times* addressed the fact that the emerging cable industry had yet to generate a new stream of programs, much less innovations in program forms. During the interview, Bratton admitted to Margulies that there existed a gap between the blue-sky rhetoric that had promised cable would deliver diverse programming and the reality of the economics facing the long-incubating cable industry that limited production capabilities:

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<sup>71</sup> Jane Gross, "Cable Television: Boon or Bane for Sports?," *New York Times*, June 17 1979.

The reason it didn't happen more rapidly...was because the industry had what I consider to be the naive idea that each cable company could generate its own programming. But just like in computers, the programming—the software—is the most expensive facet of operation. For the normal cable company, the revenue base just doesn't cover the origination costs for local programming. But if you can get it from the satellite and amortize the cost over hundreds of thousands of subscribers, then it becomes economically sound.<sup>72</sup>

According to Bratton, technology facilitated television production by shifting costs otherwise incurred by distribution to the creation of new programming, but—and this was key—the technology itself did not generate program innovation. Cable was criticized for being “parasitical”<sup>73</sup> while insiders in cable complained about the lack of available product.<sup>74</sup> The satellite served as a delivery mechanism within the television industry, but it did not function as a production technology.<sup>75</sup> The hardware/software binary risked occluding this crucial discrepancy.

Unable to produce its own programs, the cable industry desperately needed programming, and it was into this software-drought that Turner Communication Group delivered

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<sup>72</sup> Lee Margulies, "Cable TV: An Eye on the Competition " *Los Angeles Times*, November 30 1978.

<sup>73</sup> Auerbach comments that incumbents had long been concerned that cable was building a business off the work of OTA television. Auerbach, "Satellite, Cable Systems: Superstations Making Waves in TV Industry."

<sup>74</sup> This also echoes the tightening of the syndication market discussed in chapter three, after the PTAR reduced the amount of off-network product available. As a result, recent hits like *Happy Days* were earning record licensing fees on the syndication market.

<sup>75</sup> Early discussions that anticipated the networks would adopt satellite technology presumed a surplus of funds generated by the savings accrued from exchanging AT&T for a satellite distribution system. This surplus could have been reinvested into production of new forms of programming. As it turned out, though, it was new entrants like cable companies and Ted Turner who adopted satellite distribution first. They did not enjoy the secure financial basis of the networks, and therefore they did not enjoy the anticipated rush of profits imagined for the networks.



its 24-hour line-up of WTCG entertainment programs to Satcom I [see Figure 6].<sup>76</sup> West-coast based Theta Cable's Marketing Manager Frank Hickey described the blessing that the superstation was delivering to cable, helping cable fill out its channel lineup with more than Metronews text of news, weather, and sports.<sup>77</sup> WTCG featured almost three thousands films, three-hours daily of children's programming, and the best lineup of sports among independents throughout the nation. Learning more about the breadth of WTCG's programs can be difficult, however. One methodological challenge that continually plagued this project was that the journalistic reports that privileged Turner as the focus of WTCG elided a specific engagement with the programs that appeared on the air. Though this chapter has struggled to avoid reinforcing a great man narrative, the fact that much of the journalistic discourse about WTCG celebrated Turner the man over WTCG's programming lineup made researching those programs more challenging. Critics offered more information but gaps persisted.

The WTCG programming most commonly and enthusiastically discussed in print publications was its sports lineup, including baseball, basketball, and college football [see Figure 7]. It is crucial to understand, however, that sports were not necessarily a ratings winner in the 1970s. As an example of the mixed value placed on sports, note this discussion by *Broadcasting* on HBO's programming options in 1977: "it could be argued that the move toward national distribution through satellite precludes a heavy sports schedule."<sup>78</sup> *Broadcasting* journalists had little expectation that audiences outside of the local area would be interested in a team from another state. Another case in point: the reason Turner licensed the Atlanta Braves baseball game

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<sup>76</sup> At this time, it was unusual for a station to program a full 24 hours, and this was one reason WTCG appealed to cable operators. "Turner Satellite To Feed Cable TV Around the Clock," *Variety*, December 17 1975.

<sup>77</sup> Lee Margulies, "Expanded Programming from Atlanta, Chicago Superstation: Theta Cable's New Signal," *Los Angeles Times*, April 6 1979.

<sup>78</sup> "HBO: Point Man for an Industry Makes it into the Clear," *Broadcasting*, October 17 1977, 52.

in 1972 and the Hawks basketball games in 1973 was that his local ABC affiliate *turned down* the opportunity to carry the games.<sup>79</sup> During a time when networks reluctantly aired sports that pre-empted their regular programming, the Braves were a particularly mediocre team. Yet, when Turner took WTCG to the cable market, sports became the primary draw for the station.<sup>80</sup>

The growing national popularity of Atlanta's Braves and other sports teams reflected shifting industry expectations about sports in the 1970s.<sup>81</sup> Theta Cable General Manager Tom Kanarian explained the appeal of sports in a *Los Angeles Times* article about the popularity of baseball for their subscribers. After offering 18 different ball games over one two-week period in May, Kanarian reported, "The response since we began offering the service April 6 has been tremendous. We got into this for one reason—sports."<sup>82</sup> In 1977, the *Atlanta Journal* predicted a future where Braves baseball players would wear "U.S.A." on their shirts,<sup>83</sup> and by 1982, the *New York Times* published a detailed article about "America's Team," talking with viewers across the nation who had adopted the Braves as their own [see Figure 5]. By 1982, WTCG's popularity with cable companies and viewers verified a demand for more sports programming across the nation, and the company had also built a play-off qualifying team in the Braves.<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> With baseball, the ABC affiliate did not so much turn down the games as show a lack of interest—and Turner seized the opportunity in a meeting with Bill Bartholomay. Hopkins, "Turner Makes Ch. 17 Work with Sports." See also Bob Goodman, "TV Pro Basketball Starts Here Saturday," *Atlanta Journal*, January 25 1973.

<sup>80</sup> WGN offered a good deal of sports, as did other passive superstations, but because Turner owned or partially-owned several of the teams featured on his station, it was decidedly cheaper for him to secure sports distribution deals. In other words, sports didn't pay off for WGN in the same way that they did for WTCG.

<sup>81</sup> It seems WTCG's success with airing local sports across the nation likely facilitated the development of ESPN, built from the foundations of a satellite feed from Madison Square Gardens.

<sup>82</sup> Stewart, "A Bonanza Awaits the Sports Junkie: But It's a Bonanza That Has a Built-in Hitch," F13.

<sup>83</sup> Caruso, "The U.S. Braves: Ted Turner's Satellite System Gives Atlanta Sports to Nation."; Wendell Rawls Jr., "Fans From Hinterlands Root for the Braves as the Home Team," *New York Times*, October 8 1982.

<sup>84</sup> Sports writers discuss his strategy—paying above market rates for key players and trying to stabilize defections from and trades for his team. He understood that America would love a team if they came to care about the players. Gammons, "Baseball Shudders at Cost of Turner's Open-Wallet Policy."

A key component of the superstation's success and the appeal of its sports lineup was its early appearance in small market television towns and critics served as a reminder of this local strategy. The television industry had long been dominated by the major markets cities like New York and Los Angeles where a station could generate the largest local audience and the highest advertiser rates.<sup>85</sup> WTCG, however, built its following in the so-called "Hinterlands," those regions that did not have multiple independent stations or may not have even have access to all three networks. This unusual attention to smaller markets was reflected in discussions of the superstation in large-market newspapers. In Los Angeles, Lee Margulies reminded his readers that attention to the superstation would seem odd to them unless they remembered, "most parts of the country aren't served by an independent station."<sup>86</sup> Les Brown addressed his New York readership, whom he suspected "have doubtless found that the pioneer superstation...is strikingly similar to the non-network television stations in New York."<sup>87</sup> The fact that industry reporters Margulies and Brown, writing for publications in America's largest cities already well serviced by independent stations, wrote about the superstation was itself a mark of the superstation's prominence in journalistic television discourse. Moreover, these TV reporters framed their discussion as a sort of apology—explaining that there was value to this story beyond the immediate viewing context of their readers. Notwithstanding, however, these critics dampened the wider enthusiasm about the superstation reflected in journalistic discourse by issuing a simple disclaimer—what is WTCG delivering in terms of programming that is new?

Because I found scant evidence of the WTCG programs in the papers featured in this study, I turned to the station's home newspaper, the *Atlanta Journal*, and found that resident TV

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<sup>85</sup> I discussed this in chapter three in terms of the syndication market, where a program could not survive unless network O&Os in major cities agreed to license the program.

<sup>86</sup> Margulies, "Expanded Programming from Atlanta, Chicago Superstation: Theta Cable's New Signal."

<sup>87</sup> Les Brown, "Manhattan Cable TV Offering 'Superstation' via Satellite," *New York Times*, March 3 1979.

critic Bob Goodman provided a valuable perspective on the origins of WTCG as his local independent channel.<sup>88</sup> While Goodman wrote about WTCG a few times a year (compared to hundreds of references for each of the Atlanta network broadcast affiliates in his columns), he seemed to have admired Turner's ambition in 1970 to transform WTCG into the "best" independent UHF in the South.<sup>89</sup> Goodman noted efforts to build up the station through new hires, facility improvements, and the purchase of new equipment, and he described the programming on WTCG in some detail.<sup>90</sup> Goodman granted Turner (and his readers) the courtesy of attention to the efforts of WTCG to offer a specific and unique programming schedule. I also perused a sample of program guides in the *Atlanta Journal* throughout the late 1970s to identify any lesser known or local programming.

In essence, WTCG programmed for niche audiences before niche had become a real industry trend. Movies were prominent in the WTCG schedule, mostly films that were fifteen to twenty years old. The *Atlanta Journal* included a separate category in its program guide for films, and WTCG dominated with its offerings. In terms of more diverse programming, Goodman admired the 30-minute sports wrap-ups about regional college football, hosted by the coaches themselves. In the afternoon, WTCG delivered three hours of cartoons for children returning home from school, containing a solid block of half-hour off-network reruns, including *The Flintstones*, *The Archies*, *The Monkees*, and *Gilligan's Island*, among others. Weekend afternoons were full of youth-focused programming, about which Goodman gently joked, "my

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<sup>88</sup> Because cable program lineups were not printed in newspapers until the 1980s, Turner created a program guide that he sent to cable companies for audience reference. My inquiries at Turner have not yet unearthed a copy of one of these guides, but it was an issue beyond Turner. WGN, an unintentional superstation, learned in what cities it was playing when cable customers would call the Chicago station to ask for a copy of their program guide.

<sup>89</sup> Bob Goodman, "WTCG Boasts of Something for Everyone," *Atlanta Journal*, September 26 1970.

<sup>90</sup> Even independent stations often failed to account for their program diversity. An ad that ran repeatedly in *Broadcasting* in 1975 featured a freckled-face kid in a ballcap, and this quote: "WGN? Television? It's the Cubs, neat movies...and a lotta other stuff. Everybody knows that!"

nerves force me to take the program in moderation, however. It must be old age.”<sup>91</sup> Goodman may have been referencing the program titled “Rock Concert.” There were also two country music programs out of Nashville listed on the Saturday schedule, including *Pop! Goes the Country*. A program hosted by angler Bill Dance called *Outdoors* was produced in Nashville, and a second program about fishing called *Fishin’ Hole* aired directly prior. In terms of programs that may be locally produced, I found a listing for a program called *Putt Putt Golf Georgia*, and a two-hour public affairs discussion program aired at midnight on Sundays, featuring conversation about local issues including the Atlanta Housing Authority.<sup>92</sup> Most idiosyncratic was a program called *Ski Scenes*, devoted to weather forecasts for the “thousands of skiers in the Atlanta area.”<sup>93</sup> Goodman made little reference to WTCG’s news program, and Turner had never pretended that news was a key feature of WTCG. In 1972, he joked to the *Atlanta Journal* about his station’s limited news lineup, pointing out that WTCG’s ratings always go up when the local affiliates run their news programs.<sup>94</sup> As he acknowledged to a biographer, “As far as our news is concerned we run the F.C.C. minimum of 40 minutes a day.”<sup>95</sup> WTCG did not produce any original programming until the 1980s, but its scheduling practices suggested that WTCG felt the best way to counter the mass appeal of the broadcast networks was to target narrow audiences.<sup>96</sup>

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<sup>91</sup> Goodman, “WTCG Boasts of Something for Everyone.”

<sup>92</sup> Turner purposely avoided news and public affairs programming, so the scheduling of this one at midnight was consistent with his emphasis on entertainment programs.

<sup>93</sup> While I cannot attest to the devotion to skiing in a warm, Southern state, *Ski Scenes* must be the most niche programming on an independent in the South.

<sup>94</sup> Hopkins, “Turner Makes Ch. 17 Work with Sports.”

<sup>95</sup> Tony Schwartz, “The TV News, Starring Ted Turner,” *New York Times*, May 25 1980. His approach to news did come back to bite him when Turner announced his plans for CNN, and Howard Rosenberg, among others, challenged Turner’s legitimacy as a purveyor of news.

<sup>96</sup> As the superstation aroused more anger from within the television industry (particularly among producers and network executives who felt cheated by the Copyright Act of 1976), Turner promised to produce more original content. That topic is outside the scope of this project, but certainly Turner was aware that original content would please critics and regulators.

Turner did not break the mold with his programming lineup, but there are small moments of individuality or, at minimum, ultra-niche programming.

The more remarkable aspect of WTCG's programming, though, was that it was a formula that worked. Cable companies across the nation embraced WTCG's schedule [see Figure 8], they advertised its sports lineup, and their audiences responded with enthusiasm. The critique that the superstation was only old movies and reruns fails to account for the variety of markets in which this was a true alternative to the network offerings. Moreover, these programs were well received nationally. That said, WTCG, though distributed nationally, remained an independent station, offering the traditional types of programs available to independent stations. The revolution was limited.

#### 4.4 *The Superstation and Localism*

An interesting gap in the critical discourse about superstations is that critics rarely reported on the superstations that originated from their own cities. WTCG was only one of several superstations, and it was most widely reported not only because it was first but also because station owner Ted Turner *wanted* his station to be distributed by satellite. Other superstations including Chicago's WGN-TV, Los Angeles' KTTV-TV, and New York's WOR-TV were called "unintentional" or "passive" or "reluctant" superstations. The "passive" superstation was a policy-created aberration. In an effort to bring more diversity to remote areas of the nation and to encourage the expanding cable television industry, the FCC lifted its anti-leapfrogging restrictions in 1975, a significant act of deregulation that enabled the superstation by permitting cable systems to import distant signals.<sup>97</sup> For a passive superstation like WGN, a

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<sup>97</sup> "MPAA Out to Stop WTCG-type Spread Via Cable, Satellite," *Broadcasting*, August 29 1977.

company like Edward Taylor's Southern Satellite Systems (which also carried WTCG) had submitted to the FCC a request to pick up that station's signal, transmit it to a satellite, and then distribute it to various cable companies for national distribution. The FCC, claiming authority over approval of requests to pick up superstations by satellite, regularly approved these requests because it categorized companies like Southern Satellite Systems as common carriers.<sup>98</sup> As described by FCC Cable Bureau Director William Johnson, the FCC equated the position of the satellite common carrier with the telephone common carrier; as a result, asking satellite common carriers to pay for the signals they transmitted would be "like making the telephone company pay for a crime committed over the phone."<sup>99</sup> Stations like WGN therefore had lost control over their signal.<sup>100</sup>

Critical accounts of the passive superstations generally made visible a radical disjuncture between these station's local identities and their national ones. In essence, the superstation and its home station were two separate phenomena, and critical discourse reflected this. As such, critics and journalists who reported local news about these stations tended not to mention that they were superstations, too. WOR was a case in point. WOR appeared articles by Les Brown and other reporters in the *New York Times* with some regularity in the late 1970s and early 1980s

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<sup>98</sup> Les Brown, "Satellite Use in Cable TV Stirs Dispute: No Basis for Denial," *New York Times*, July 7 1979. Legal discourse about the superstation in the 1970s focused most of its attention on the role of the FCC in creating the phenomenon of the superstation. For example, Stuart Brotman wrote about the superstation from the perspective of copyright for the *Communication Entertainment Law Journal*. Brotman identifies the compulsory license created by the Copyright Act of 1976 as the primary impediment to a free market relationship between superstations and stations / program producers. At the time of his writing, the FCC had not yet rescinded the 1972 cable rules, but he was already worried about this eventuality and suggested retransmission consent as a possible solution. Legal scholar Niels Schaumann confirmed the validity of Brotman's anxiety by finding that three FCC decisions partnered with the compulsory license component of the copyright law to open a wide-enough loophole for superstations to avoid engaging fairly in the television licensing marketplace

<sup>99</sup> Jeffrey Liebowitz, "Superstation Development and the Changed Potential of Cable Television: Regulatory Problems and Possible Solutions," *Copyright Law Symposium* 29(1983): 143.

<sup>100</sup> The FCC halted the creation of any new superstations in the 1980s. WTCG eventually converted into a full-fledged cable channel much later in its history as well.

because its license was under dispute.<sup>101</sup> In piece after piece, the *Times* described WOR's license issues and how they affected the local community but never once did it note that WOR was also a superstation, airing in homes across the country.

When critics did make the connection between a local station and its superstation status, however, they often failed to account for the local experience in their reports. For instance, Ron Alridge, who succeeded Gary Deeb as the *Chicago Tribune's* TV critic, reported in 1980 that WGN had announced plans to convert to 24-hour programming. However, he framed his brief discussion only in terms of satellite-enabled cable distribution: "News that WGN-Ch. 9 will soon begin 24-hour-a-day programming will thrill cable TV operators around the country. Cable companies love 24-hour programming; it gives them a selling point. And WGN, a satellite-transmitted superstation, is carried by many cable companies."<sup>102</sup> That quote was the entirety of the report. Alridge did not include an explanation from WGN executives, he did not address local Chicago audience desire for 24-hour programming, and he did not explain the slightly sarcastic tone underpinning his comment. Moreover, WGN was an unintentional superstation, so the adoption of a cable-friendly 24-hour cycle demanded deeper inquiry as to whether WGN had learned to embrace its superstation status. Alridge's fleeting reference to the hybrid superstation here suggested a deeper tension among critics for how they should account for the local, and indeed how they might define "localism" in the first place.

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<sup>101</sup> Due to the illegal activities of its parent company, RKO had its license renewal application for several television stations, including WOR, rejected by the FCC. The situation became more contentious when a senator advanced the idea of transferring WOR from New York to New Jersey, because New Jersey did not have a single VHF station serving its local market. See also Les Brown, "F.C.C. Aide Denies Application for Channel 9's License," *New York Times*, December 20 1974; Les Brown, "Broadcast License Battles: The Successful Challenge Against RKO General Sending Shock Waves," *New York Times*, January 26 1980; Irvin Molotsky, "Jersey Senators Ask WOR-TV Shift," *New York Times*, May 29 1980.

<sup>102</sup> Ron Alridge, "Ron Ely Swings Through Excellent Pageant," *Chicago Tribune*, September 8 1980.



The disjuncture between the local and the national highlighted how contested was the terrain of the superstation. Gary Deeb wrote two pieces about WGN's status as a satellite, and both articles cited a dispute that challenged WGN's ability to service its local audience. In the first article, Deeb reported that though WGN had finalized a deal to carry an NCAA basketball game, the NCAA pulled out because it feared the station's satellite transmission would interfere with individual deals the NCAA had made with other local stations across the nation.<sup>103</sup> Deeb's mention in this instance was one paragraph long, added to a column about ABC sports as a "brief."<sup>104</sup> Several months later, a sports writer for the *Chicago Tribune* offered a more detailed discussion of the incident, quoting Jack Jacobson, General Manager of WGN-TV calling the superstation "a monster."<sup>105</sup> This NCAA incident became the most frequently cited example of the damage superstations' status could wreak for licensed television stations.<sup>106</sup> KTTV Los Angeles similarly complained that it was unable to serve its local audience because producers

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<sup>103</sup> Gary Deeb, "Death Knell: ABC Sports Dropping Out of the TV Baseball Business," *Chicago Tribune*, March 30 1979.

<sup>104</sup> Deeb enjoyed sports so much that he wrote a weekly column for the Sports section of the newspaper, so the brevity of this piece is truly unusual for him.

<sup>105</sup> Scholarly discourse about the superstation in the 1970s focused most of its attention on the role of the FCC in creating the phenomenon of the superstation. For example, Stuart Brotman wrote about the superstation from the perspective of copyright for the *Communication Entertainment Law Journal*. Brotman identifies the compulsory license created by the Copyright Act of 1976 as the primary impediment to a free market relationship between superstations and stations / program producers. At the time of his writing, the FCC had not yet rescinded the 1972 cable rules, but he was already worried about this eventuality and suggested retransmission consent as a possible solution. Indeed, legal scholar Niels Schaumann confirmed the validity of Brotman's anxiety by finding that three FCC decisions partnered with the compulsory license component of the copyright law to open a wide-enough loophole for superstations to avoid engaging fairly in the television licensing marketplace. The legal discourse, therefore, focuses on a top-down analysis of policy shaping technological use and innovation, reinforcing the lack of agency accorded to the stations employed as superstations. Schaumann also offers a terrific overview of the pre-history of satellites, including the significant policy decisions of the FCC that influenced its slow growth before 1976. Stuart N. Brotman, "Cable Television and Copyright: Legislation and the Marketplace Model," *Communications and Entertainment Law Journal* 2(1979-1980); Niels B. Schaumann, "Copyright Protection in the Cable Television Industry: Satellite Retransmission and the Passive Carrier Exemption," *Fordham Law Journal* 51(1982-1983).

<sup>106</sup> Another Chicago station picked up the NCAA game, so the audience did not miss the opportunity to watch the game.

like MCA and sports teams like the Dodgers refused to engage in licensing deals with them for fear it would undermine the value of their syndicated offerings sold market by market.<sup>107</sup>

Localism therefore became a unifying principle behind the objections to the superstation, and local critics were uniquely positioned to address the complex questions about the mission of licensed stations, their control over their content, and the needs of the various publics—local, regional, and national.

The Motion Picture Association of America, representing the interests of content producers, petitioned the FCC to halt the spread of the superstation in 1977. They cited a variety of complaints, but all the MPAA objections were framed through an appeal to the importance of localism. The opponents of the superstation without fail applied a geographic interpretation of localism, privileging stations within a particular mile range of individual viewers.<sup>108</sup> Their argument also implicitly naturalized the industrial structure of the television industry. As TV reporter and critic for *Variety* Paul Harris noted, local outlets were essential for TV production for it was those stations that purchased syndicated off-network reruns to provide the additional revenue needed by producers to recoup their production expenses incurred through deficit financing.<sup>109</sup> Passive superstations, those independents whose signals had been unwillingly picked up by a satellite common carrier, also claimed localism as their primary reason for alarm. Metromedia, unhappy that the FCC approved the request by common carrier ASN to pick up their Los Angeles independent, KTTV, described the situation as follows: “How does the commission expect a station like KTTV to continue to serve its community of license when

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<sup>107</sup> Alexander Auerbach, "FCC Acts to End 'Superstation,' Cable TV Curbs," *Los Angeles Times*, April 26 1979.

<sup>108</sup> Napoli, "The Localism Principle in Communications Policymaking and Policy Analysis: Ambiguity, Inconsistency, and Empirical Neglect."

<sup>109</sup> Paul Harris, "TV-To-Cable Via Satellite Blasted Hard By MPAA," *Variety*, August 31 1977.

nationwide marketing of its signal, which it is powerless to control, threatens to inhibit its ability to acquire program product?"<sup>110</sup>

Examining critical discourse can identify times when critics intervened into industrial, rhetorical, and regulatory conversations, challenging the way terms were employed and de-naturalizing presumed "truths" of television. For instance, Lawrence Laurent showed little patience for the MPAA's appeal to localism, questioning whether this term had any value in relation to the American system:

No small part of the problem is the insistence of the Federal Communications Commission that television is a 'local' medium... A local production of music or drama is as rare as a station that loses money. Still, the 'local' fiction is maintained, because regulators know more about history than what they can see with their own eyes any day of the week.<sup>111</sup>

Laurent defined localism through program origination and topic. Because he found that stations rarely produced their own programs aside from news, he deemed the entire concept of local programming to be an oxymoron. Laurent's larger point was that the TV industry employed a use of localism that reinforced the industrial logics that justified the structure of the industry. Localism, therefore, was more of an economic term than a geographic one.

Localism, from the perspective of viewers, could encapsulate a variety of meanings that rarely involved matters of economics or policy. In the few newspaper articles that interviewed actual TV viewers, these individuals seemed relatively unconcerned about localism. Sports executives worried about young people growing up without an allegiance to a local team, but the enthusiasm for "America's Team" only increased the team's popularity, even increasing

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<sup>110</sup> "Metromedia Asks FCC To Save KTTV From Superstation Link," *Variety*, March 28 1979, 72.

<sup>111</sup> Lawrence Laurent, "A Brand New Year, But Not New For TV," *Washington Post*, December 31 1978.

attendance at games.<sup>112</sup> “America’s team” exposed that geography was not a pre-requisite for fandom. Viewers also cited a host of reasons for enjoying the programming delivered by satellite from other parts of the country. A herd breeder in New Mexico commented that he enjoyed picking up superstation WGN for its 4 a.m. livestock report and because he regularly watched the news from New York on WOR-TV. The breeder mused, “Seeing what goes on in the city makes you happy to live out here.”<sup>113</sup> In a rare piece that provided a detailed description of actual viewers’ TV habits, Jerry Stein, a Cincinnati-based television critic, talked with a local couple. With access to 60 channels, the woman interviewed punctured most of the idealistic discourse about the diversity of cable and satellite television by revealing how many channels she and her husband did not watch: “

Five QUBE channels. Nothing's ever on four of them. The 13 public-access channels. Nobody ever uses them. Here's the USA/C-Span. I do watch the government hearings. Two weather stations (a grunt of approval from Bill). CBS [sic]-that's the cultural channel they are taking off. Nobody watches it. I don't, but it still should be on. The religious channel (a preacher in plaid slacks is on). I don't watch it. And, oh yes, here's the color bar so you can adjust your set. We never use it.<sup>114</sup>

What she did watch, however, were the three superstations, because she enjoyed the “difference in outlook” among the local news programs. Viewers’ habits and preferences therefore did not necessarily accord to the values imposed by the industry, and their consideration of localism sometimes meant becoming familiar with another part of the country. Direct audience interaction among critics and audience, as reflected in the piece by the Cincinnati critic above, was rare,

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<sup>112</sup> Rawls Jr., “Fans From Hinterlands Root for the Braves as the Home Team.”

<sup>113</sup> Steve Ditlea, “For the TV Viewer Who Wants It All: Satellite Antennas,” *New York Times*, October 28 1979.

<sup>114</sup> Jerry Stein, “Living with Video Part II: 60 Channels No Heaven in Suburbia,” *Los Angeles Times*, November 15 1982.

which makes Stein's piece more valuable.

One possible reason for the relative silence of viewers in critical discourse was the low status of television. In the article mentioned above in which a couple in Cincinnati described their experience of 60-channel cable television, they also found it necessary to qualify their love of the TV, repeatedly. The woman assured the interviewer, "I don't want you to think our TVs are running all the time... We subscribe to ten to fifteen magazines and we read them."<sup>115</sup> When she admitted that they sometimes watched television while they ate dinner, she apologized, "This really sounds awful... We watch the news for an hour and half while we eat. But we do talk." The article, which was about how two viewers engaged with the new potentials of technology, provided a list of the activities the couple enjoyed apart from the TV and concluded with this thought from the couple "I think we're being taught always to be involved in some kind of action. I wonder why we can't take the time anymore to watch the ocean rolling in or the sunrise or just to think?" The anxiety on display here permeated conversations about television, reducing the medium to a shameful distraction from the real experience of life—full of sunrises and deep thinking.

#### 4.5 *Conclusion*

This case study of satellite superstation WTCG demonstrates how television critics brought a broader set of questions to bear their discussions of new media technologies than did reporters who did not specialize in television reporting. These questions tended to position the superstation in context, examining its broader impact upon the historical and contemporary television industries. To some extent, the subject of the superstation demanded a firmer

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<sup>115</sup> Ibid.

distinction between the reporter and the critics, something less necessary in the previous chapters, because WTCG could be of relevance for sports, business, and television reporters alike. While reporters would boldly declare statements like, “technology has rendered networks as we know them obsolete,”<sup>116</sup> critics would alternatively suggest a more cautious consideration of the possible influence of new media distribution methods, as reflected in this quote from *Chicago Tribune* critic Ron Alridge: “It seems more likely that pay TV will simply relieve the networks of whatever moral and political obligations they have to televise artsy shows of limited appeal.”<sup>117</sup> From the perspective of critics, underestimating the persistence of the incumbent television industry companies seemed naïve. Moreover, by analyzing the hardware/software binary that often gave rise to utopian paradigms that envisioned new tools delivering greater diversity instantly, critics issued a strong reminder that programs, in the end, were at the heart of the business of television, and technology most often remained a mere conduit.

Tom Shales, the critic for the *Washington Post* at the end of the 1970s, attempted to grasp the medium of television broadly, even in his reporting about new technologies. For example, when thinking about the perceived weaknesses of television, Shales posited, “Although television today may seem a failed miracle to many, those who wanted from it only genial companionship have had little cause for complaint. Others, however, expected much more.”<sup>118</sup> He thus accounted for the long history of technological promise that had surrounded television. He also provided television with an alibi for its most decried faults, suggesting that perhaps the expectations placed on television were too great from the beginning.

Shales also reported repeatedly the efforts of the incumbent TV industry companies to

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<sup>116</sup> Von Hoffman, “Cable TV threatens networks.”

<sup>117</sup> Alridge, “Will Pay TV Deliver a Knockout Punch to the Networks?.”

<sup>118</sup> Tom Shales, “At the Proverbial Point of Diminishing Returns,” *Washington Post*, November 30 1975, F5.

stifle technologies like the superstation and other emerging technologies, like the VCR. He contended that the networks would strive to contain technologies, perhaps at the expense of the audience:

In opposing such developments as cable and pay cable television, industry spokesmen invariably plead that they will not be able to face such competition and that the new wonders pose economic threats to them. Never is it alleged that the public will suffer, because it only stands to benefit [according to the networks]. The public is usually left out of these discussions. Also omitted are such facts as that from 1971 to 1976, according to Department of Commerce figures, network television earnings increased an outlandish 192 percent. Network revenues in 1977 were nearly \$2.6 billion. This industry crying poverty is like Warren Beatty claiming celibacy.<sup>119</sup>

In just a few sentences, Shales exposed the absence of a concern for the public and a certain hypocrisy among figures like Jack Valenti of the MPAA, who were complaining of the suffering of incumbent TV business being displaced by new media. For Shales, discussions of technology must incorporate a consideration of the past, of the various stakeholders at the present, and of the programs that produce the medium's *modus operandi*.

Shales' work spotlighted the contributions of critics to a wider inquiry into and understanding of television and technology. TV critics were somewhat unique among the critics of the arts. More than evaluators of programs, TV critics developed a deep understanding of TV as a business, as a regulated medium, and as a technology capable of much but limited by more. Their work not only incorporated a variety of perspectives and program types but also continually engaged with the ways television could better deliver on the potential of its form. As shown here, technological innovations did not operate outside of the wider context of culture,

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<sup>119</sup> Tom Shales, "Fading Reception," *The Washington Post*, February 28 1979.

industry, and discourse. Critics, as distinct from their fellow reporters, frequently featured a unique approach to technology, providing a grounded, nuanced, and, at times, hopeful insight into the ways new technologies could inspire new programs, business practices, and visions of change. Because of its hybrid status, the superstation invited a deeper consideration of the satellite's impact upon the networks, the independent television stations, the emerging cable industry, the FCC's role as regulator, and the common carriers entrusted to carry the signals across the country. Most essentially, though, the superstation drew attention to the unique contributions of the critics to discussions of media technology because of their insistence that programs always be accounted for and because of their unique mediating role—between the industry and audience, and also between their reporter colleagues and the readers of their print publication.



## 5 CONCLUSION

One of the main interventions in this dissertation is its methodology: a qualitative analysis of critical discourse as a primary source across a range of publications to account not only for the ways scholars have overlooked this figure as a research resource but also for how critical writings correct oversights in naturalized histories of the 1970s. I have identified television criticism as a profession, a source, and a site, frameworks through which scholars may incorporate the critic into our work more fully. As a hybrid journalist, uniquely empowered to offer subjective opinions, the 1970s critic not only has documented the reception of television programs but also provided insights into the operations of the TV industry and the evolution of TV technologies during that era. In addition, critics engaged in debates about the broader value of television within American culture during the 1970s. As a historical source, critical discourse is a trace of conversations and programs long forgotten. Their work complicates naturalized historical discourses, highlighting overlooked programs throughout the 1970s as well as forcing scholars to reconsider how our own preferences have privileged particular texts and historical events. Reading history through critical discourse invites a reconsideration of how scholars have researched the past and how the critic can be more directly employed and realized as a primary source in the future. The critic-as-site also challenges TV scholars to stop taking this figure for granted, being more attentive to examining the critic in context.

Each chapter featured a topic I argue has been unseen in television histories, employing critical discourse as a corrective to the historical record. In chapter two, three case studies of program evaluation highlighted the series of negotiations critics performed when reviewing programs. A historical setting tied all three case studies together, as authenticity—and its

opposite, “nostalgia”—became recurring themes in critical writing about all three programs. These programs are also connected through the ways critical evaluation linked each program’s relative value with the value of the audience who accepted or rejected each program. Broadly, critics envisioned the audience represented by ratings as distinct from their own point of view, rather than as like-minded viewers or as possible allies in the defense of excellent programming. The programs’ success in terms of ratings demonstrates the ambivalent relationship between the critic and the perceived mass audience.

While critics largely viewed *The Waltons* as “quality,” it nevertheless has been largely overlooked in television histories, despite the fact that it had a distinctive authorial voice, strong scripts, and a talented cast. I examined this program to reveal not only how it was “saved by critics,” but also how this salvation discourse obscured the role of the audience in the success of *The Waltons*. While *The Waltons*’ audience was largely discounted as contributors to its longevity, the audience for *Happy Days* earned critical ire for their support of a program critics condemned as trite. Denouncing the programming strategy employed by ABC and chief programmer Fred Silverman, driven by a mix of family-friendly and sexually provocative programs, critics presented the audience as Silverman’s dupes, too passive to notice ABC’s pandering to their baser instincts. While critics described the dramatic achievements of *The Waltons* in detail, they rarely assessed *Happy Days* through its own generic aspirations as a comedy. Instead, critics largely denounced the latter program as nostalgic and historically inaccurate. Critics seem to have envisioned two audiences—one they imagined in their own minds as their readership and one they interpreted through the lens of industry operations: the mass and undifferentiated audience of the ratings. Creating this distinction, critics not only routinely condemned audience preferences but they also failed to analyze the inherent flaws in

the industry's construction of the mass audience. As such, critics perpetuated the television audience as passive and lacking distinction, when they could have served as a rejection of this formulation.

With *Holocaust*, critics debated the program's mix of fiction and fact, interrogating whether television could deliver a representation of one of history's most horrifying events. More than aesthetics, the critics used *Holocaust* to explore the possible limits of television's representation of the past. Those critics who felt the program was important predicted that audience reaction would confirm, once and for all, if viewers wanted challenging, even discomfiting programs. Those who found the program too earnest and lacking in a needed objectivity, however, regretted the program's success as another instance of television appealing to an audience unable to distinguish between art and commerce. Lying beneath every evaluation of these programs was a persistent inquiry into television's commercial mandate, with critics unsure of how much could be achieved in a medium dependent on converting viewers into ratings currency. Evaluation, therefore, has been featured here as a broader project of assessing not only programming but also the audience's interest in the work critics identified as most worthy or most objectionable. Critics therefore sometimes contributed to the denigration of the audience through their intended elevation of the medium.

Chapter three extended an inquiry of the critic beyond program evaluation to consider how critics connected matters of policy to programming. Focusing quite narrowly on the first three years of the PTAR's development to assess how its reputation as a failure became an established fact, I employed critical reviews as a historical trace to challenge the taken-for-granted discourse of the PTAR's failure. While critics contributed to broader discourses about the PTAR by reporting, repeating, and naturalizing the narratives established by privileged

stakeholders in policy implementation, they also kept a close focus on their professional stakes and subjective investments as critics. With their central concern being the programs that aired on the television, critics created a rare, albeit selective, portrait of PTAR programs. Programs like Winters-Rosen's *Story Theater* identified a lost moment of opportunity for the PTAR, a moment squandered by a divided FCC unwilling to hold firm to their prohibition of off-network reruns and by station owners disempowered by an economic and industrial structure that concentrated distribution power in the hands of three broadcast networks. As an example of a study of "media policy from below," the critic helps scholars spotlight how policy impacts programming as well as the audiences at home watching it.

Many media histories have failed to account fully for the broader diversity on display during the early stages of technological development and evolution. The final case study, chapter four, investigates the critic's role in naturalizing utopian technological discourses. In this chapter, I found that critics wrote in distinct ways from their staff reporter colleagues about the innovation of the satellite superstation. While previous chapters accounted for the critic without a strong distinction between critics and television reporters, this chapter explored possible divisions between critics as journalists and as program reviewers. The evidence provided in this chapter indicates, once again, that critics offered unique perspectives on television. In this case, through their attention to programs, critics in the 1970s delivered a grounded, real time assessment of satellite superstation WTCG's hybrid identity. Much as historians have often dismissed the PTAR programs as nothing more than game shows and reruns, scholarly discussions of the satellite superstation have focused mainly on its role in distributing reruns and old movies. Looking at the critic—as a profession, source, and site—serves as a corrective, opening new avenues for research and innovative paths for a deeper knowledge about

television's past.

This study has accounted for six publications here, but there are a variety of other publications that could further extend or complicate my findings. For example, an analysis of a publication like *TV Guide*—the most widely distributed print publication in the U.S. in the 1970s—might invite consideration of how critics addressed a truly mass national audience of readers. While this study concentrates upon the most prominent print newspapers, imbuing the critics working there with greater visibility nationally, a future study could incorporate local critics from smaller, regional markets, particularly in a town like Minneapolis that has long enjoyed a reputation as a city in which local investigative reporting is valued by newspaper editors and readers alike.<sup>1</sup> Beyond enhancing the diversity of the publications included as research, future research on the television critic could account for the critic's commentary on such topics as the noncommercial television industry, the birth of the cable industry, advertisements, children's television, and network news programs.

One notable absence in this project is the lack of female voices as textual or interview sources. Though not discussed in this dissertation, there were women working as critics in the 1970s, including Cynthia Lowry of the *Associated Press* and Susan Paynter of the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*. These women's perspectives could further expand the scope of my work. Another absence is a non-white perspective, and a deeper investigation of whether there were critics of color working in the 1970s would contribute to a broadening of the perspectives featured here. Despite these absences, the larger goal of the project has remained intact: to encourage a deeper examination of the complexity of the critic and their role in presenting TV history. A figure all too often dismissed or reduced to an unreliable reflection of audience reception has been more fully foregrounded in the previous chapters.

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<sup>1</sup> Several critics I interviewed described Minneapolis as a place where local journalism excels.

While scholars and critics have largely worked on related, parallel paths, the critic might be a closer partner in scholarly efforts to understand television. As I discussed in more detail in the introduction, history has provided us with examples of scholar and critic engagement, such as the symposium held in 1979 by the Journalism Resources Institute at Rutgers University that brought together critics like Les Brown and scholars like Horace Newcomb. Yet beyond the walls of Rutgers, what sort of impact did this symposium have upon scholarship or criticism? For scholars, a closer alliance with critics would offer immediate benefits in terms of distribution capacity. While critics' work circulates widely, academic work tends to circulate narrowly. Scholars operate in a relatively closed world, during the 1970s and today, with our work reaching fellow scholars but rarely moving beyond that realm. Blogs, social media sites like Twitter, and digital scholarly publications, however, have increasingly expanded the reach of both critics and scholars and inspired new conversations between us in recent years. Notwithstanding, this project revisits historical critical discourse to point out the variety of ways we have not fully utilized the work of critics in our own research. Moreover, it has shown the ways our interests intersect in complicated and under-examined ways.

### *5.1 Critics on Criticism: A Conversation with Second-Generation Television Critics*

To facilitate deeper conversations between scholars and critics, this project has expanded the common understanding of the critic as a program evaluator to document the ways critics have commented on the wider television industry. I have to some extent resisted offering an explicit definition of TV criticism throughout, but this was a conscious and strategic decision. For a variety of reasons, the profession of TV criticism eludes easy definition. First, there were not many critics working in the 1970s who entered the newspaper business intending to write TV

criticism; in fact, former TV critic Noel Holston estimates that fewer than five percent of his colleagues in criticism in the 1970s planned or prepared to be a TV critic.<sup>2</sup> Because critics often stumbled upon the position through varied career paths, each brought a unique set of skills and journalistic values and thus defined his/her work differently. Second, there was no established mentorship process for new critics despite the fact that a second generation of critics entered the industry in the 1970s. Without a clear apprentice system or academic curriculum, TV criticism tended to be a beat learned on the job rather than prescribed through precedent and tradition. Moreover, this second generation of critics, inspired by the prominent role journalists played in exposing the Watergate scandal, extended the purview of the critic by commentating more extensively on industry, policy, and technology than had their forebears.<sup>3</sup> As a result, I found more distinction than continuity between first and second-generation critics in terms of what topics they included in their columns and how broadly they defined their beat. Third, even though every critic I spoke with considered himself a journalist, they did not necessarily define either “journalism” or their beat similarly. Critics generally worked with a lot of freedom, and therefore each critic selected topics based on their interests, experiences, and expertise. Due to each critic’s relatively unique approach to the beat, their work was often as difficult to pin down as the medium of television itself. Just as studying television requires a consideration of the medium as entertainment, news, technology, and commerce, so too does a study of the critic demand an agile shift from the critic as a profession, a source, and a site.

1970s critics’ personal origin stories provide some insight into the reasons the field can be so resistant to delineation. I spoke with a number of critics, defined broadly, to learn more

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<sup>2</sup> Holston, *Personal Interview*.

<sup>3</sup> The most prominent first-generation critics featured in this study, Cecil Smith and Jack Gould, both reported industry matters more objectively than did the next generation of Howard Rosenberg and John J. O’Connor.

about how they came to write about television, how they defined the beat, and what they hoped was their legacy [see Table 1]. I've referenced these interviews at times earlier in the dissertation, but below I account for the interviews in a more comprehensive manner in order to examine more closely how critics defined their own beats. By considering each critic alongside the other, the parallels—and sometimes stark differences—become more apparent. Putting all these voices in conversation in this conclusion, I aim to deepen the complexity of the portrait of the critic provided in previous chapters while also drawing broader conclusions about the value of their work for TV scholarship.

Howard Rosenberg, TV critic at the *Los Angeles Times*, went into the newspaper business in the late 1960s hoping to become a foreign correspondent. His main obstacle was that he knew nothing about the newspaper business. Rosenberg describes his arrogant approach to journalism for his first job with a small newspaper in Moline, Illinois: "I was utterly unprepared [for the job.] Originally, I was just writing breaking news, and I remember thinking I was doing a great job writing this shit that I thought was terrific, sending it to my parents and saying, 'this is a journalist who has a future.' I shudder when I think about it now." After learning how to be a journalist in Illinois, Rosenberg moved to the *Louisville Times* in 1971, where he worked the City Hall beat: "I was covering county government, City Hall, and I'm sure I was doing an adequate job. And I always felt that I was going to be a competent reporter. Brilliant? Probably not. But I wanted to do something that elevated me, and at the time, they did not have anybody covering television." For Rosenberg, then, the TV beat was undiscovered country where he could distinguish himself from the other reporters. He also had no problem expressing his opinion, noting that comfort with subjectivity was a key requirement for a TV critic: "I remember, I became a hit right away, not because I knew what I was doing, because I didn't, but



just because I was opinionated. It never bothered me, some people have a difficult time giving their opinion on anything.” Due to his experience working the City Hall beat, Rosenberg brought his interest in politics to the TV beat by writing about local news. From the start, Rosenberg was sharply critical of the local television news industry, which he found to be too self-promotional. Describing the type of criticism he wanted to write, Rosenberg explained: “I wanted to kick asses, but not gratuitously, and I feel like much of [other TV criticism] was too soft.” Though he denied having an explicit agenda, he did gain a reputation for speaking his mind, what he called a sincere effort to be “honest” always. Rosenberg’s portrait of himself conveys the critic as tough, opinionated, determined. Working as a critic empowered him to insist that his local television industry strive to do more, and this emphasis on localism distinguished his work throughout his career.

While Eric Mink did not use the term “kick ass,” he shared Rosenberg’s interest in local news. He, too, wanted to hold the local television industry accountable for how it delivered the news to its audience. Mink began his professional journalism career in the early 1970s at a magazine for the Auto Club in St. Louis, working his way up to managing editor over his four years employed there. When he transitioned to the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, he worked as a consumer affairs reporter. His role as a consumer advocate infused his criticism subsequently. A short stint writing for the UPI wire service about a newspaper strike in St. Louis fired Mink up to write about government and regulation as well. Under assignment by his editor, Mink took on the TV beat somewhat reluctantly two years later in 1979.<sup>4</sup> This editor was new to the *Post-Dispatch*, and he sought out Mink because he wanted to change the direction of the TV critic’s column to reflect the fiery television criticism coming out of Chicago. Mink ultimately took the

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<sup>4</sup> He had wanted to be the paper’s film critic, but the person in that position was not planning to give it up any time soon, Mink explained.

position of television critic because “there was this sort of sense within the industry that this was the hot new beat.” As described by Mink, his TV critic predecessor at the *Post-Dispatch*, John Archibald, had defined the TV beat narrowly, featuring mainly program reviews and interviews with stars. The paper wanted Mink to take the column in a different direction. Mink gradually realized that the TV beat posed stimulating challenges through its tough opinion-based format, limited word count, and the requirement to write three to four times a week.<sup>5</sup> Because he had worked as a consumer affairs reporter, Mink always interpreted criticism as providing a consumer service.

Noel Holston had planned to be a banker, something “to please my folks,” but he decided to give journalism a try on a bit of a lark in the late 1960s. He trained as a cub reporter at the *Orlando Sentinel*, and it was his editors that decided he could be their first TV critic: “I grew up on television. I was a comic book nut, a baseball card collector—I did all the right things [to be a TV critic] not knowing that such a field was going to bloom as writing about popular culture. And [my editors] recognized that. They actually had to buy me a television set when I got the job. Cause I didn’t have one.” Holston cited a number of critic mentors, including second-generation critic Ron Powers, to whom he sent copies of his early work for critique. Holston looked to those before him for models for how to write and evaluate as a critic: “What Ron told me (and what I think I already saw but he really reinforced it), was that a critic does not just write about the specific show, a critic writes about what that show is saying about our culture, what it is saying about our politics. Television is worth writing about because it encompasses everything.” In his own work, Holston tried to provide for readers some thought that could stay with them, helping them think through their own reactions to a show. “Your job [as a critic] is to

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<sup>5</sup> Mink distinguished between working as a reporter and writing a column, so his terminology was slightly different from my use of staff reporter vs. critic.

try to say something interesting that makes people think a little bit deeper about what it is they're watching...I would hope that something I said stuck. And made people look for different things in what they watched." His goals, therefore, were relatively humble—he did not ascribe to the critic the power to "save a show" or to influence the decision makers in the TV industry. Instead, he hoped viewers enjoyed watching alongside him and wanted to think more deeply about their reaction to a program. Holston emphasized his program reviews, and it was through programs that he most connected with his readers.

Tom Shales told me a few stories that made it seem he was a born critic, though when I said this to him, he replied, with a laugh, "that's a horrible thing to say." He always expressed himself through writing: "When I was in high school, I was editor of my high school paper, when I was in college, I was editor of my college paper, and I just had a sort of incurable proclivity toward journalism. So I always just assumed that I would make my living through writing, somehow." He started working at a sort of underground newspaper,<sup>6</sup> and then slowly worked his way into the *Washington Post* through series of part-time positions that eventually transitioned to full-time. One point of distinction from his fellow critics was that Shales was most influenced by film critics. He cited Bosley Crowther of the *New York Times* and Pauline Kael of the *New Yorker* as his primary models for the kind of critic he wanted to be. Shales did not mention these film critics because he felt film to be superior to television but rather because they reflected his admiration for *how* these critics wrote about their medium. Of Kael, whom he thought was "just brilliant," he noted in particular, "When I didn't feel like writing myself, I would sometimes pick up one of her pieces and just read it, and she wrote with such *joie* that I would get interested in writing again. Just like that—it was like taking a pill or something. Not

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<sup>6</sup> This story is more interesting than I have space to mention here, but this paper was created by "the most hated man in DC," the owner of an airline and bus company. The paper, the *DC Examiner*, was to be given for free to passengers on the bus trips.

that I was ever as good as her.” His heart was in the writing, though he also joked, “I guess I’ve just been picky, always had opinions.” Shales’ work reached beyond the screen to situate television within culture, within broader understandings about the world of the 1970s.

One thing that united the critics discussed above despite their singular origin stories was that each was empowered to convey personal opinions in a newspaper. When I asked the critics to distinguish between their roles and those of staff reporters, they continually cited “opinion” as a value of their work. Shales took the responsibility quite seriously: “just being told to write your opinion and then being able to do it basically freely always seemed like a privilege.” Shales also tried to follow two rules to make his writing as enjoyable for readers as possible: a bad review should always express one positive thing, and a pan should be funny. Though his work was based on opinion, he still followed particular, self-imposed rules: a review should not be wishy-washy. These rules helped him to deliver his opinion with consistency and with attention to all manner of people whom he thought read his work, including the industry folks responsible for the programs he panned.<sup>7</sup> The fact that Shales followed rules for writing negative pieces reflects his realization that he could ameliorate the most difficult part of the job through some kindness.<sup>8</sup> Rosenberg alternatively embraced fully the freedom to share his views, though he also humbly admitted, “I’m sure there was ego involved—everybody knew who I was.” Bianculli, the youngest of the second-generation critics I interviewed whose origin story I described in the introduction to this dissertation, responded to a question about whether he considered future readers when he wrote by joking that he only thought about deadlines: “But it is satisfying when you know that you are the rough first draft of opinion. That’s what’s fun.” These men all knew

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<sup>7</sup> Shales told me that during his tenure, he learned TV executives started reading his work in the *Washington Post* in addition to their traditional papers, the *New York Times*, the *Los Angeles Times*, and the industry trades. This seemed to please him.

<sup>8</sup> While his editors encouraged Shales to be meaner, he tried to critique with a code of behavior.

they were only one voice, yet they also appreciated the power bestowed on them by their profession. They sought to give their opinions responsibly, and they strove to be fair, honest, and consistent.

Lee Margulies of the *Los Angeles Times* helps to establish one hard line between a critic and a reporter. For Margulies, the reporter was not empowered to share opinion, and he defined himself as a reporter. Yet when he was hired as a TV reporter for the *Los Angeles Times* in 1976, his editors asked if he would also write some program reviews. Margulies had not anticipated this, and it made him nervous. Looking back, he is surprised by how many program reviews he wrote, though he was never fully comfortable with wearing that hat: “It didn’t feel right to me. To make critical judgments of the work of various people whom then I might turn around the next day and want to interview or want them to be a news source, it seemed like it was possible trouble there... It never came up as a real problem or complaint, but it was something I was aware of and sought to avoid if I could.” Margulies feared that writing as a critic would undermine his efforts as a reporter, and as he was a reporter first, this troubled him. Even though no one—not an editor, not a TV executive, not a reader—challenged Margulies for writing the occasional review, he did not define himself as a critic and therefore did not feel it appropriate for him to convey a subjective opinion as required when reviewing programs. Interestingly, Margulies’ anxiety stemmed from his job title, not from his experience. When hired as a TV reporter for the *Los Angeles Times*, he learned the beat like any reporter would. But the line between critic and reporter was not based on experience but rather professional identity.

As these remarks indicate, every critic I spoke with defined his relationship to journalism a bit differently. Rosenberg placed criticism “under a broad umbrella of journalism,” but he

nevertheless distinguished himself from colleagues who reported television news in terms of the different sources they cultivated. For instance, Rosenberg avoided industry events such as the Hollywood Radio and Television Society luncheons or the National Association of Broadcaster conventions, but he acknowledged that such gatherings would be a good places for a reporter (distinguished from a critic) to cultivate contacts. He also said his efforts to break news were not really consistent with the TV critic beat: “I was a critic but I was critic / reporter. I really blurred the lines, maybe in a bad way. That was sort of controversial when I got to the *Los Angeles Times*. Some people thought critics should never do anything that involved news.” As a critic, Rosenberg insisted on independence to avoid any conflict of interest or impropriety. He refused to become a member of the Television Critics Association, for example, disdaining the “pack journalism” that often resulted from the summer press tour. When I asked him if he missed the sort of collegiality that the TCA may have provided, he pondered, “Maybe I longed for it at the time, but no, the price would have been too high.” Rosenberg was proud of his ability to write with some sense of humor and he was unafraid to confront those in power, but he seems to have most valued his professional integrity, and he maintained that through distance.

Each critic found a different way to negotiate the competing responsibilities of reporting media industry news and evaluating programs—the former perceived to be an objective task and the latter a subjective one. Eric Mink described himself as a journalist without hesitation, as did David Bianculli, who felt comfortable switching from his role as critic to his role as reporter. Bianculli described the difference: “to this day, 8,000 years later, I still sort of think of myself as a journalist as much as I do a critic. When I’m giving my opinion, that’s my opinion, but when I’m researching a story or writing a story or reporting a story, I leave myself out of it.” Serving as both a critic and a reporter did not bother Bianculli, but Noel Holston struggled a bit more

with how to define his work. Holston did not train as a journalist and therefore found it difficult to think of himself as one. He commented, “A critic isn’t necessarily a journalist, but I learned on the job enough to be happy about, even confident in being a reporter, too.” More specifically, Holsten described the TV beat as a form of interpretive journalism, but he approached his work as a reporter differently than his work as a critic:

I basically had to wear over the years two different hats. There was the hat in which I had to be as objective and non-opinionated as possible, and basically just report information and news that I did the legwork for. That is the thing that always bothered me the most, you know...I’m being to the best of my ability fair and just trying to cover who said what and all that bit...I never believed that the reader typically understood the difference.

For Holsten, the title of journalist never fit comfortably, and he found it difficult to assert his authority in two different directions—one more objective and one more subjective. The fact that he wasn’t sure his audience understood the potential conflict—the ways he would speak with different degrees of subjectivity—highlights the challenge of developing a relationship between critic and reader. Critics like Holston struggled to identify not only who was their audience but also what was the right way to address this audience. Unable to identify with any surety who was their readership, critics remained somewhat unsure if their work was ever received as they intended. This anxiety that their readers could not fully understand the complexity of the critic’s industrial position may have contributed to the negation of the mass audience identified in the previous chapters.

One interesting factor to consider is that the critic, as an employee of a print publication, is a professional construct. All the critics described above negotiated their identities as journalists

and critics differently, and they claimed different discomfort levels with the fact that the job demanded them to write from both professional perspectives. To some extent, it seems critics' dual hats placed them in a truly paradoxical industrial position—both journalist and commentator, both objective and subjective, both program evaluator and news reporter. Their relative discomfort with the position of critic was partly a result of their background and professional experiences, but it also testified to particular ideologies surrounding the work of the critic. Because critics of the time worked for print publications, not television stations or programs, their outsider status became a central tenet of their identity. Their work had always largely depended on their skills as writers, the same skillset of the print reporter, rather than on their bright or magnetic personality, something necessary for those who appeared on the television. Their employment with a print publication influenced their relationship with the television industry, their understanding of program aesthetics and practices, and their envisioning of their audience. Positioned as distinct from the medium, critics have been able to maintain a persona of unbiased adjudicator, but this professional distance has also prevented them from being viewed by those within the television industry as partners in advancing the medium's prospects.

With so much of the critical task a product of naturalized professional practices and ethics, how a scholar accounts for a critic is of crucial and equal importance. The similarities among the critics described above document how deeply embedded and unquestioned were particular norms about their roles. The first norm taken for granted was that there was value to criticism—evaluation, analysis, commentary—of the television industry. This value was implicit, confirmed by the fact that newspapers employed critics, typically as figures distinct from journalists. The impact of their work did not require proof of efficacy, so the critic's influence



operated less as a concrete set of outcomes but rather as a contribution to discourse and the production of meaning. Second, the critic's implicit authority derived from the legitimacy of the newspaper. This was a particularly fascinating "given" of the industrial position of the critic. One medium, print, commented on the achievements of other—visual—mediums. Consigning the critic to employment at a newspaper endowed the critic with a particular set of journalistic values, even though the operations of critique and reporting may have been in tension. A third assumption of the job during the 1970s was that the dual role as critic and reporter served as an asset rather than as a liability. Reporting the industry provided the critic with a deeper knowledge of TV operations, and that in turn fed into their work in evaluating programs and identifying trends. Fourth, the critic was less an individual than a role—and therefore new critics replaced old, seemingly without missing a beat, even as the next generation of critics may have approached the role rather differently.<sup>9</sup> All of these norms had to be accepted to legitimize the conceit of the critic as he had come to be known.

By considering the critic as a profession, a source, and a site, this dissertation has denaturalized the norms described above, making visible the "production" of the critic as a figure of authority, expertise, and a limited range of operation. The fact that the critic played no role in the production of television—and had no power to influence those who did produce television—was itself a norm. Further, the critic could not control whether the audience watched a program or enjoyed it. For these reasons, the critics with whom I spoke negated the power of their role repeatedly. For example, Rosenberg conceded, "I have no individual power myself," noting that

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<sup>9</sup> To be clear, these are not assumptions I herald or support. Instead, they are operational assumptions I have observed, and despite their taken-for-granted nature, I am highlighting them because these assumptions have particular effects. For example, Howard Rosenberg's column did not provide the same "insider" perspective as Cecil Smith's. When Rosenberg retired, his successor critics did not maintain his attention to the criticism of local news. These shifts in focus belie the relative lack of attention paid when one critic departs and another succeeds.

it was the audience who held the power in their decision to watch (or not). Holston rejected the theory that a critic could “save” a program: “I don’t have any real proof that anything ever saved a show from cancellation except for some executive who stood up for it or research that said if we can just get more people to watch it, to check it out, it can make it.” Holston’s comment put the power in the hands of the executive or research team. Mink considered criticism a “pure consumer service,” a view of the critic as a participant in the commercialization of television, as a contributor to the transformation of the audience into a consumer, which in essence put the power in the hand of the advertiser. Each time a critic denied impact, or looked to another figure as wielding more power than him/herself, the critic willingly acknowledged limits to the work s/he produced. The critic, therefore, was empowered to speak but was denied the power to change. Despite the self-effacing way that most critics presented themselves, scholars reconsidering the historical role of the critic might identify the unique contributions these figures have made in our understandings of television and our knowledge of its programs and operations. Though critics may deny proof of their efficacy, for scholars, their work nonetheless provides an incredibly rich and relatively untapped resource.

## 5.2 *Contemporary Criticism: A Parallel Moment of Change*

The assumptions described above relate most directly to the critics working in the 1970s that I spotlighted in this dissertation. How these assumptions have shifted in the past forty years, however, invites an appraisal of the differences between television criticism then and now. From this project’s conception, I always planned to employ a historical methodology, but I also intended to engage the historical data in a second manner by comparing the 1970s with the contemporary era of television. In the end, the 1970s provided such a vast trove of research that I

had to abandon my plans for a comparison of the past and today. In the next few pages, however, I'd like to examine how the findings of this project may be applied to a consideration of criticism today. There are many parallels between the changes within the television industry in the 1970s and the contemporary television era, including the profound shifts prompted by new technologies and the ever-increasing lineup of channels. For instance, in the 1970s, enhanced TV viewing options included the stronger public broadcasting system, the arrival of basic and premium cable channels (particularly HBO), and the increased prominence of independent channels (particularly the superstation). Today, an even greater set of new channels and viewing platforms include web-based streaming and original television content, DVD and Blu-ray collections of entire television seasons, and all sorts of mobile media applications. Just as the 1970s saw a new emphasis on daring adult "quality" programming like that of the MTM and Lear factories, the 2000s have seen HBO, AMC, and other cable networks deliver programming with more mature content and sophisticated narrative strategies. In terms of broader industry parallels, the ratings companies struggled in the 1970s to account for cable viewing just as they struggle today to account for mobile and online viewing. The networks have found their share of the audience pie decreasing, a trend started in the 1970s and accelerated significantly in the Internet era. As industry and audience have worked to orient themselves around the new distribution and exhibition technologies of the 1970s and today, critics have consistently served as mediating figures, interpreting industry strategies and informing audiences about new trends in programming. Below, I'll revisit the three-tiered approach to criticism that has shaped this project, to explore how contemporary criticism may be informed by the work of their predecessors in the 1970s.

The profession of TV criticism has experienced similar significant shifts in the 1970s and the present. For instance, as described by founding member of the Television Critics Association [TCA] David Bianculli, the founding of the TCA was partially a response to the influx of second-generation critics like himself who were inspired by the work of journalists who exposed the Watergate scandal to establish a new independence from the TV industry's influence.<sup>10</sup> The professional criteria and guidelines drawn by the TCA in the 1970s had to be revised in 2006 due to an influx of another new generation of critics publishing on the Internet.<sup>11</sup> The TCA now officially includes within its membership critics employed by any "text-based Internet news organizations," though the TCA continues to accept only those TV critics who work *full time* for "legitimate" publications.<sup>12</sup> In the most dramatic shift from the 1970s, however, critics today have embraced new styles of engagement with readers through audio podcasts, comment section debates, and sometimes even through short-form videos.<sup>13</sup> The implications of critics' enhanced engagement with their readers (or at least with a subset of their readers) demands fuller inquiry. For a variety of reasons, then, critics today have faced similar challenges to define the parameters of their profession as did 1970s critics, having to alter their role to account for the many changes within the television industry.

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<sup>10</sup> Bianculli, *Phone Interview*. Bianculli also said that some of the "old timers" did not know why the critics needed to reject network funding of junkets, but they gradually accepted the new guidelines for ethical action.

<sup>11</sup> Television Critics Association, "Bylaws of the Television Critics Association," <http://tvcritics.org/tca-bylaws/>.

<sup>12</sup> "Legitimate" seems to be defined in the TCA bylaws as publications "supported by advertising and/or paid subscriptions." The part of this sentence that I'd like to highlight, though, is "full time," as that seems to be where the market is most shrinking. There is all sorts of television criticism published online, but the number of critics able to support themselves in this role appears to be contracting. As print publications like newspapers have lost advertisers and subscribers to web-based media, critics too have departed their employment with print to work exclusively for online companies, as when Alan Sepinwall departed the *New Jersey Star-Ledger* to work at *Hitfix.com* and when Mo Ryan left the *Chicago Tribune* to work for *AOL.com* (now the *Huffington Post*).

<sup>13</sup> Critics Michael Ausiello of Deadline-owned *TVline.com* and Kristin Dos Santos of Comcast-owned E! Entertainment company have served a prominent experimenters with a video interface, becoming themselves performers on "TV," even if that TV is a computer screen.

In terms of *what* critics write today, then, the differences between critics of the 1970s and now are profound. The most prominent change in how contemporary critics define their purview is that those critics like Alan Sepinwall of *Hitfix*, Maureen “Mo” Ryan of the *Huffington Post*, Todd VanDerWerff of the *AV Club*—those who write online and engage frequently on social media sites like Twitter—have widely embraced what some scholars have called “the aesthetic turn.”<sup>14</sup> Critics today also have adopted a mandate to review a set of prominent programs weekly. While the 1970s critics featured distinctive foci, from local news to policy to a broader cultural contextualization, critics today are largely engaged in a similar and labor-intensive effort to review every episode of particular programs as they air, with a strong emphasis on narrative continuity and thematic coherence.<sup>15</sup> These traits unite them as proponents of a particular brand of criticism and of quality programming.<sup>16</sup>

I personally worry that the shift to a more detailed aesthetic evaluation of television among contemporary critics narrows their role—as critics of television and more broadly as critics of culture—to an alarming degree. While the attention to a particularly complex, serialized set of programs, particularly those airing on premium and basic cable, contributes to an

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<sup>14</sup> I borrowed this term from a roundtable proposal for the FLOW Television Conference, to be held in November 2012 in Austin, TX.

<sup>15</sup> ABC’s *Lost* is a good example of a dense serialized program that withstood weekly reviews from a host of critics. The fact that so many critics were writing about this program every single week is documented by Myles McNutt in his critical round up posts that featured excerpts from various episode reviews the morning after a new episode aired, like this one here: <http://cultural-learnings.com/2010/05/19/lost-the-morning-after-critics-ponder-what-they-died-for/>.

<sup>16</sup> Critics like Alyssa Rosenberg of *ThinkProgress.com* and Linda Holmes of the “MonkeySee” blog demonstrate a different approach to criticism, but they define themselves less closely as TV critics, preferring the broad appellation of (pop) culture critics. I should also note that critics today are at times ambivalent about the pressure to produce timely episodic reviews. First, not all programs demand such detailed engagement—dense programs like *Lost* may benefit from more frequent reviewing than an procedural, for instance. Second, the time demands of the weekly review mean critics are necessarily unable to review as broad a spectrum of television programs as critics writing in the past. Third, the fans of serialized programs may be quite devoted, and at times they react poorly to negative reviews of individual programs. For more on critic ambiguity about the weekly review, see Bob Sassone to Bob Sassone: The Official Web Site, 2012.

elevation of television as an aesthetic medium, it also obscures important facets of contemporary media.<sup>17</sup> The fascination among critics with programs like *The Wire* and *Mad Men*—a fascination that scholars share with critics—overlooks that not all households subscribe to cable and that network broadcast television continues to attract the largest audience of viewers. Further, entertainment programs are only one type of television content produced for TV, which continues to be a medium of news, children's, and public affairs programming. That critics today rarely account for these other program genres limits the range of their work and develops an incomplete archive that privileges a particular subset of valued texts.<sup>18</sup> As long as television continues to be the most popular media platform for Americans, a critical engagement with the variety of types of content it delivers to viewers remains essential.<sup>19</sup>

In some ways, my critique of the 1970s critics failing to approach *Happy Days* as a comedy, instead critiquing it based on less apt notions like its embrace of a critically-derided escapist nostalgia, remains valid today. Contemporary critics rarely devote time to analyzing why programs like *Two and a Half Men* and *The Big Bang Theory*, both shows that feature stereotyped protagonists with great charisma (akin to the Fonz), have found success with such a wide audience of viewers. This fact was acknowledged by *The Onion's* TV Club, a blog about television, when critic Todd VanDerWerff reviewed Ashton Kutcher's first appearance on long-running ratings smash *Two and a Half Men*. His review was preceded by this announcement:

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<sup>17</sup> For examples of euphoria over the quality of contemporary television, see Devin Gordon, "Why TV is Better Than the Movies," *Newsweek*, February 25 2007; A.O. Scott, "Are Films Bad, or Is TV Just Better?," *New York Times*, September 8 2010; James Wolcott, "TV is Officially Better than Film," *Vanity Fair*, May 2012.

<sup>18</sup> James Poniewozik of *Time* stands as a useful exception. Perhaps because he writes for a weekly publication, his articles tend to concentrate upon broader trends rather than individual programs. He frequently comments on news and other program types beyond primetime entertainment television.

<sup>19</sup> A whitepaper by comScore and the Coalition for Innovative Media Measurement found that 9 out of 10 Americans continue to watch television on TV. Steven Loeb, "TV Preferred Over iPads, Computers for TV, Cable Shows," *Vator.tv*, June 11 2012. See also [http://www.comscore.com/Press\\_Events/Press\\_Releases/2012/6/comScore\\_and\\_CIMM\\_Release\\_Research\\_Paper](http://www.comscore.com/Press_Events/Press_Releases/2012/6/comScore_and_CIMM_Release_Research_Paper)

(The Internet has made TV criticism more prominent, but the kinds of shows TV critics write about—serialized dramas and single-camera comedies—are rarely the kinds of shows that become popular with a mass audience. Every week, TV Club is going to drop in on one of the top-rated programs in the nation, one that we don't normally cover. What makes these shows popular? Should we be covering them more often? Are our preconceived notions about quality not necessarily following popularity justified, or are we jumping to conclusions?) [parentheticals are the site's]<sup>20</sup>

VanDerWerff awarded the episode of *Two and a Half Men* a “D-”, but his review assessed the program’s strengths (its ability to really hit a punch line) and its weaknesses (series creator Chuck Lorre can’t really do “dark” comedy). Critics today are therefore conscious of the perceived divide between what they enjoy and what the audience reflected in the ratings enjoys, yet the fact that this divide has persisted for more than forty years only increases the urgency for critics to analyze more closely why the divide exists and what it means for the role of television within culture.

The point I want to make extends beyond a concern for critics to account more fully for popular entertainment programming to encourage a deeper interrogation of what critics are not covering. In a recent podcast recorded by Maureen “Mo” Ryan and Ryan McGee for their “Talking TV with Ryan and Ryan” series, for example, the two critics acknowledged that not all programs require a weekly review.<sup>21</sup> Their conversation concentrated on the nature of criticism and how the weekly focus on particular programs may limit their work, but they did not extend their scope to contemplate the variety of other types of criticism they could offer. Similarly,

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<sup>20</sup> Todd VanDerWerff to avclub.com, 2011, <http://www.avclub.com/articles/two-and-a-half-men-nice-to-meet-you-walden-schmidt,61932/>.

<sup>21</sup> This podcast was recorded in May 2012.

freelance<sup>22</sup> TV critic Bob Sassone described in a recent blog post what he perceived as the greatest weaknesses of contemporary television, and his #1 example was the episodic review. Employing his own dose of nostalgia, Sassone intoned, “Wouldn’t it be better for the future of TV criticism if most shows were reviewed like they used to be?” He continued that many programs—and the overworked critics writing about them—would benefit from less attention.

There remains great value to critics’ work evaluating programs, but it seems to be that these critics are missing an additional type of critique. The critics featured in this dissertation engaged in a broader analysis of television, in particular its corporate ownership, its distribution mechanisms, and its commercial mandate, and critics today produce this type of work less often. Because critics break down the objective/subjective divide that governs who can report what and how, they may envision new ways to report news in an age that is highly mediated. Journalists today are finding the objectivity mandate to be stifling at times. For example, Andrea Seabrook left her post as a Congressional reporter for National Public Radio to start her own site because she felt “lied to every day” on the Hill, and she was frustrated that as a reporter she had to report these lies without subjective commentary.<sup>23</sup> Similarly, Joe Flint, a business reporter for the *Los Angeles Times*, described to me that he could only print particular observations about the television industry if he found three people working within the industry to confirm his observations. Critics, however, combine the functions of reporter and commentator, and this can infuse their work with a distinctive point of view, derived from their expertise and professional stakes in the value of television. I have found in the work of 1970s critics examples of a nuanced and far-reaching criticism that discussed television as entertainment, policy, technology, news

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<sup>22</sup> Sassone was employed by *TV Squad*, an early web-based site devoted to TV criticism that was bought by *AOL*, which then became the *Huffington Post*. He was informed that he was being let go through an email, and he posted about it, with some genuine upset, on Twitter. He published a less emotional description of his firing on his blog, here: <http://sassone.wordpress.com/2011/04/08/goodbye-aol/>.

<sup>23</sup> Patrick Gavin to Politico, 2012, <http://www.politico.com/news/stories/0812/79998.html>.



and more. Yet critics today—with expanded outlets for their work—nevertheless reflect a much smaller portrait of the TV landscape.

Interestingly, the 1970s professional distinctions between critics and TV reporters have been transferred to the web. Sites like the TV Club employ critics like VanDerWerff to review programs, but they ask other writers, like News Editor Sean O’Neil, to cover the industry. Moreover, when critics do report the industry, they reinforce longstanding industry structures, even those that may seem illogical in terms of the many different ways that viewers access content today. For example, when writing about the ratings struggles of *Parks and Recreation* and *Community*, Todd VanDerWerff instructed his readers to watch the programs live or legally online: “While you’re waiting for news on [#Community](#) and [#Parks](#), watch the new episodes tonight. A ratings bump certainly wouldn’t HURT... Hey, if you’re downloading Parks early and watching it that way, you are PART OF THE PROBLEM.”<sup>24</sup> Another user of Twitter followed up by asking VanDerWerff whether it mattered how non-Nielsen audiences viewed the program. This question evokes the complexity of the contemporary media environment as producers and networks scramble to sustain their business model, built on distribution windows and advertising support dependent on the collection of ratings data. As the conversation between VanDerWerff and his readers continued, the readers probed the value of foreign audiences viewing the program online, the way networks “count” legal online viewing, and how viewers can better support their programs by adhering to the industry’s longstanding structures of operation. VanDerWerff’s comments repeatedly reminded readers of the status quo: “It’s complicated,” he wrote, “But watching live is always helpful.” His comments did not, therefore, challenge that status quo.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> I collected tweets from the conversation in a Storify draft here: <http://storify.com/greeney28/tv-ratings-debate/preview>

<sup>25</sup> VanDerWerff made a similar argument in a review of *Community* on the *AV Club* site: “Here’s as good a place as any to make this plea: Watch this show (and [Parks & Recreation](#) and

1970s critic Noel Holston described his own discomfort with his perception that contemporary criticism concentrates too narrowly on program evaluation:

I have always felt that there was way too much attention paid to entertainment programming, and not nearly enough to news and commercials and other aspects of television that also reflect things about society and that just have a lot to tell us about where we are. And that kind of stuff is covered even less today than it was 20-25 years ago. I just wish that more people writing about television looked at its relationship to and impact upon life and thought and so forth. And I just don't see much of that.

In Holston's view, the attention to episodic program reviews has dramatically limited the range of critical writing. Therefore, while critics in the 1970s were criticized for failing to review more than one episode (usually the first) of any particular program,<sup>26</sup> critics today suffer similar antagonism for their more dedicated attention to every episode of an individual program. Both are perhaps extreme views of critical work, for as I noted in chapter two, critics did write about all the case study programs more than once. Thus while there is a richness and value to the aesthetically-focused brand of program criticism, there other elements of television as an industry and entertainment medium that seem to have been lost, including a critique of the advertising-model of television that has been exported to web-based television distribution.

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*Cougartown* and *Fringe* and...) live. I know you think you don't count if you don't have a Nielsen box. And you don't. Not directly. But the idea behind Nielsens is that other people *like* you will watch live, will get drawn in. Watch the show. Talk about how you watch it. Talk about what time it's on. You never know when you're going to motivate a Nielsen viewer, and that will bump the show's ratings up a touch. *Community*'s on a network mired in last place of the big four. This is a network that has other, bigger problems. If we can boost the show's numbers just enough that it's one of the network's lesser problem spots, we'll have this show for probably years to come. Watch it live. Watch it on Hulu the next day. DVR it if you must but don't skip the commercials. Todd VanDerWerff to avclub.com, 2011, <http://www.avclub.com/articles/geography-of-global-conflict,62354/>.

<sup>26</sup> Richard Adler and Douglass Cater, *Television as a Cultural Force* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1976). 7.

Another value espoused by the 1970s TV critics featured in this project—localism—has also lost its prominence in the most popular critical writing about television today. The 1970s era critic’s authority to critique the systems that produced television derived in part from an affiliation with a locally based print publication. For example, critics working for the *Washington Post*, based in Washington, D.C. in the center of federal government operations, reported policy news, from coverage of the FCC to Congressional communication legislation, with more regularity than did their non-D.C.-based peers.<sup>27</sup> The simple fact of geography infused the critic with a sense of mission. Hence Eric Mink, Noel Holston, and Howard Rosenberg all wrote about their home city’s local news production with some regularity. Indeed, Holston’s proudest moment derived from “one of the most ambitious things I ever did as a critic:” a detailed, researched analysis and evaluation of the local 6 p.m. and 10 p.m. news on every station in Minneapolis. As Holsten later learned, the journalists employed by the local stations appreciated his fairness, even suggesting he complete a report like that once a year. As a critic in Minneapolis, a city known for its investigative reporting, Holsten found the fullest realization of his responsibility as critic through his work on the local industry, evaluating the extent to which the news divisions fulfilled their responsibilities to the public trust.

Two possible reasons locally infused reportage has declined in the contemporary era are corporate conglomeration and the shift of criticism from print to web-based media. First, as critic Ed Bark experienced when working at the *Dallas Morning News* [DMN], he was discouraged in 2000 from writing anything negative about the local station under the same ownership as his newspaper: “‘Localism’ is the new mantra, but I’d been muzzled on that front

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<sup>27</sup> Joe Flint, working at the DC-based *Broadcasting*, described walking the halls of the Federal Communication Commission building, looking for scoop: “The other thing that you did—the FCC was on M street, it was three blocks from our offices. It was not unusual just to say, ‘I’m gonna go over to the FCC and roam around. Ad that’s literally what you would do.’” His proximity, in other words, fed his work.

since Feb. 3, 2000. That's when Belo Corp., owner of the *DMN* and Dallas affiliate WFAA-TV (Channel 8), instituted a ban on critiquing or covering local TV news stations in what now is the country's sixth-largest TV market.”<sup>28</sup> Bark left the paper in 2006 after 26 years with the *DMN*, taking an offer of a “voluntary” buyout for fear that his departure would otherwise be forced. Yet he refused to be silent about his sadness at “the demise of homegrown TV coverage and criticism in a big-time TV market.” Bark’s determination to write about his local market derived from his sense of professional responsibility—quite simply, he felt the critic’s job included commenting on the production efforts of TV stations based in his hometown. Corporate conglomerate concern for Belo’s sister properties, however, forbade him from undertaking that type of critical effort. In a media climate defined by conglomeration, Bark’s experience signals a growing concern for critics still employed by newspapers, or otherwise employed by companies owned by larger conglomerates with interests in multiple media properties.

The second reason critics’ reportage about local stations may be declining in the 2000s is that critics today work for newspapers less often than they had in the past, and this is another professional stake for contemporary critics. The fact that members of the print media critique visual media, from film to art to television, has roots in the earliest years of the twentieth century.<sup>29</sup> The oddity of this professional affiliation has been noted by journalist Mal Oettinger and scholar Barry Cole, who have argued that television abdicated its responsibility to critique itself by failing to hire and air critics of TV on the medium itself.<sup>30</sup> The reason print became the home of television criticism may itself be a worthy topic for deeper analysis, but my point here is less why newspapers employed television critics than what it means that they are no longer the most visible home for television criticism. Websites like *Hitfix.com*, the *AVclub.com*, and

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<sup>28</sup> Ed Bark to UncleBarky.com, 2006.

<sup>29</sup> Both Wikipedia and Filmsite.org report the “first” film review was published by *Variety* in 1907.

<sup>30</sup> Cole and Oettinger, *Reluctant Regulators: The FCC and the Broadcast Audience* 56-57.

*TVline.com* have become prominent sites for varying styles of television criticism, with the former two sites specializing in detailed episode-by-episode program reviews and the latter developing from the spoiler craze of the late 1990s and the subsequent interest in gossip “scoop” about what is happening on TV.<sup>31</sup> These sites, by their very nature, are not local.<sup>32</sup> While their corporate headquarters operate out of a particular city, the distribution mechanism of the Internet allows easy transmission across the globe. Critics working for web-based publications, therefore, address a global audience and tend to direct their work towards the programs that circulate more broadly.<sup>33</sup> As a result, the focus on local news reflected in the work of Howard Rosenberg and Noel Holston is no longer an integral contribution of TV critics like Alan Sepinwall. No one critic can do everything, of course, and the explosion of program options in the 2000s has made the unknowable beast of television all that more challenging to cover. Yet a central question that permeates this project interrogates not only the limits of the critic’s purview but also the unique contributions of the critic as a figure who at once addresses programs, industry, and technology. Without an explicit link between policy, industry structure, and program evaluations—all feature topics of the 1970s television criticism examined here—has contemporary criticism become too specialized? With critics losing their long-established

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<sup>31</sup> In the late 1990s, as the World Wide Web became popular through the interface of browsers like Netscape, television fans began exchanging details about upcoming episodes of their favorite programs through such fan sites as Spoiler Slayer, dedicated to conversation about *Buffy the Vampire Slayers*. Another site prominent in the dissemination of spoilers was Ain’t It Cool News. As the TV industry clamped down on the sorts of internal leaks that provided spoilers, network PR representatives began to release “official” spoilers to such TV critics as Michael Ausiello (then at *TV Guide*) and Kristin Dos Santos of the “Watch with Kristin” column on *online.com*.

<sup>32</sup> *Hitfix* and *The Onion*, which owns the *AV Club*, remain independently owned and run, while *TV Line*’s parent, Deadline, is part of a larger digital media company called PMC. *Television Without Pity*, which popularized the lengthy recap model of television review (accounting for a minute-by-minute retelling of the episode) and was purchased by NBC Universal in 2007, which is now owned by Comcast Corporation.

<sup>33</sup> There remains a focus on U.S. programming on sites based within the U.S., despite the fact that the web theoretically should allow easy transmission of programming across national lines. This national focus, however, likely reflects the continued dominance of the U.S. distribution industry and the persistence of over-the-air distribution tradition.

employment at print publications, the professional stakes have perhaps never been greater.

While acknowledging that “localism” is a problematic term, it nevertheless continues to justify the fundamental structure of the television industry.<sup>34</sup> The FCC continues to regulate local stations as the holders of a license to operate on the publicly owned airwaves. Media historian Thomas Streeter has described the structure of this system as illiberal though based in a liberal ideology, for it “reflected the triumph of a particular configuration of business organization, technology, and state action, a configuration characteristic of corporate liberalism: corporate-private sector cooperation with the public sector, small business relegated to a secondary role, and grassroots nonprofit activities pushed to the fringes.”<sup>35</sup> Through this ideologically driven conceptualization of how the airwaves should be operated, the government has placed a good deal of faith in private corporations to act as responsible trustees of the public interest. These philosophies are somewhat antiquated yet remain in practice as legacies of an earlier system. With TV critics focusing more on the national than the local, they have abdicated attention to a central tenet of TV industry operations that local stations must take responsibility for all programming airing through their distribution mechanism. Moreover, the fact that viewers are now accessing programs through a host of other distribution mechanisms, particular web-based ones, only increases the importance of critical attention to the way the policy and structure of television no longer addresses the realities of TV operations today.

The critics I spoke with, who largely retired at the start of the Internet age, found that the already great demands on their time had only increased with the shift to a blog-style journalism.

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<sup>34</sup> Not all critics working in the 1970s and early 1980s placed an emphasis upon local reporting, and the publications featured here were among the most widely read across the nation. David Bianculli happily gave up his responsibilities to local television when he started working in Philadelphia because they already had a journalist assigned to cover local news. Nevertheless, the significance of a focus on the local extends beyond news production.

<sup>35</sup> Streeter, *Selling the Air: A Critique of the Policy of Commercial Broadcasting in the United States*: 79.

The means to trace audience engagement on a website—through comments, hit counts, and social media tracking—is more direct than with newspapers, and this has inevitably influenced what critics write and how often they write. Howard Rosenberg explained that the intense pace of five to six stories a week encouraged at the *Louisville Times* in the early 1970s left him exhausted, burnt out, and concerned that the quality of his work had declined in the push to publish. He went to the *Los Angeles Times* later in the decade for many reasons, but one reason was the fact that he could post only three times a week and still satisfy his editors. Noel Holston estimated that over the course of his career, he probably wrote over twelve thousand pieces: “I probably wrote enough copy for a couple of Tolstoy novels.” Critics have therefore always struggled to account for the far-reaching impact of television, but this struggle has intensified due to the 24-hour news cycle and the increasing fetishization of “breaking news.” It seems that in response to these pressures, critics today have concentrated their attention on programs, at the expense of wider industry reportage and attention to localism.

Among the most troubling trends I’ve identified in contemporary criticism, however, is that the temporary nature of the Internet has placed in jeopardy the long-term value of the TV critic as a historical source and site of analysis. I struggled for access to some publications when researching the 1970s, finding that publications like the *Chicago Sun-Times* are archived in so few places that even the Chicago Public Library did not have microfilm of the paper from the 1970s. Nevertheless, newspaper remains a relatively well-archived media format. Websites, however, prove challenging to preserve. First, the enormity of the content generated for online publication by any one media-focused website, much less all media-focused websites that may be of interest to future generations of media scholars, is virtually impossible to capture and store. Second, the preferred format of websites shifts over time, as software updates and trends in

presenting and accessing content develop. Thus while the blog format became prominent in the 2000s, a new “liquid” style consistent with sites like Tumblr appears to be replacing the blog style, as evidenced by *Eonline.com*’s recent website update.<sup>36</sup> With each website update, content tends to be lost.<sup>37</sup> Nonprofit sites like internetarchive.org have taken on the challenge of preserving the history of the Internet, but their records are static snapshots, often incomplete, and frequently lead to dead URLs. Moreover, as critics move from one web-based employer to another, the archives they have maintained on employer-owned websites often disappear. When Mo Ryan left the *Chicago Tribune* in 2010, for example, she asked the paper to ensure the accessibility of her web-based articles. To date, links to her entire archive of web-based articles remain accessible, but a software update for the *Chicago Tribune*’s website seems to have displaced and confused the HTML that organizes her site [See Figure 9].<sup>38</sup> Digital archiving, therefore, poses challenges in terms of storage capacity, software shifts and file compatibility, and ease of access in perpetuity. The critic cannot serve as a valuable source for TV scholars for years to come if all trace of their work has disappeared.

One seeming benefit of critics’ wide-scale adoption of web-based criticism is that they now enjoy a more active engagement with their readers through comments and other digital communication mechanisms.<sup>39</sup> The audience exists for critics as a diverse, actualized set of

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<sup>36</sup> Stuart Elliott, "As E! Channel Rebrands Itself, It Introduces a More Ad-Friendly Web Site," *New York Times*, July 9 2012.

<sup>37</sup> Web design software and digital film format compatibility pose issues for the archiving of moving image content as well, so it is a topic film archivists examine frequently. See also Milt Shefter and Andy Malts, "The Digital Dilemma: Strategic Issues in Archiving and Accessing Digital Motion Picture Materials," (Science and Technology Council of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, 2007).

<sup>38</sup> Visit Mo Ryan’s former “The Watcher” column for the *Chicago Tribune* here: [http://featuresblogs.chicagotribune.com/entertainment\\_tv/archives.html](http://featuresblogs.chicagotribune.com/entertainment_tv/archives.html)

<sup>39</sup> How critics engage with commenters is a much larger topic deserving of its own study. Not all interaction with commenters is positive, and many critics, particularly women, have encountered angry or abusive comments from their readers.



individuals who express opinions visible to all on the critic's website.<sup>40</sup> Moreover, the programs that critics discuss often enjoy repeat attention, so critics have created a sustained engagement with a program that mirrors the program's own long format. Yet there are stakes to these changes: if the television critic no longer comments upon local news or industry, will another figure (like the local news anchor) pick up this cultural role? If the comments attached to their articles are not captured by archival spiders that scroll the web, then how will future researchers follow the conversations in which critics have engaged with their readers?

Repeatedly throughout this dissertation, I have drawn attention to the value of critics focusing on the programs at the heart of many broader conversations about television industry and policy, and this is no less true with contemporary criticism. Due to the explosion of new online distribution outlets, there are innovative experiments in program production and circulation that need more visibility. For example, Myles McNutt, who is at once a critic employed by the TV Club and a scholar at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, has written about the relative obscurity of the Hulu-produced original program, *Battleground*. As McNutt notes, "*Battleground* has languished in relative television obscurity despite delivering what I would categorize as a solid first season."<sup>41</sup> His concern was largely with the promotional function of critics, inquiring what was the threshold for critics with high visibility like *Hitfix*'s Alan Sepinwall to write about a show with seemingly limited exposure like *Battleground*. I'd extend McNutt's concern to question how programs like *Battleground* will survive as part of the historical record, should the program itself not survive one season and should its host site end its

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<sup>40</sup> To avoid seeming too enthusiastic, I should note that reader comments often must be reviewed and approved, or if not approved then they are always subject to deletion by a site editor. Comments also do not appear alongside a critic's writing but rather below it, and often on subsequent pages that require clicking through to follow. The comments are not an equal space but they are an improvement—in terms of reader visibility—over the much more selective "Letters to the Editor" model of print publications.

<sup>41</sup> Myles McNutt to Antenna, 2012, <http://blog.commarks.wisc.edu/2012/05/07/stranded-on-the-tv-battleground-hulus-invisible-original/>.

experimentation with producing original programming. Critical attention to this show would function like the PTAR reviews examined in chapter three; they would serve not only as a promotional review but also as a trace for future research about experiments with digital distribution through a streaming-only exhibition model.

Television today is transforming, and critics are natural commentators about how these transformations not only impact our understanding of what is television but also what may be new models—in terms of programming format, business structures, and audience engagement—for the medium. For instance, in what ways are gaming, online video streaming, and other web-based applications extending or contracting the definition of what qualifies as “television”? How are the historical business models—notably the marriage between advertising and programming—operating online? Are there opportunities to reconsider the value and methods of the dominant ratings companies that critics may be able to highlight and promulgate? To what extent are longstanding conceptualizations of the television (as a mass medium) and its audience (as passive viewers but active consumers) being challenged or reconceptualized? What is the role of government in the expanding media universe, and how may citizens more actively engage with these debates? Too often, critics are overlooking these and other urgent issues. Moreover, these are questions that engage TV scholars as well, from Robert W. McChesney, who writes about the conflict between consumerism and citizenship, to Lawrence Lessig, who writes about privacy and copyright, to Siva Vaidhyanathan, who writes about media, cultural policy, and the danger of an uncritical faith that technology solves all problems.<sup>42</sup> That fact that these scholars

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<sup>42</sup> Robert McChesney, *The Problem of the Media: U.S. Communication Politics in the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2004); Lawrence Lessig, *Remix: Making Art and Commerce Thrive in the Hybrid Economy* (New York: Penguin Books, 2009); Siva Vaidhyanathan, *The Anarchist in the Library: How the Clash Between Freedom and Control Is Hacking the Real World and Crashing the System* (New York: Basic Books, 2004); Siva Vaidhyanathan, *The Googlization of Everything (And Why We Should Worry)* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2011).

are often discussing media beyond the television box only reinforces the need for critics to themselves engage in deeper questions of how we define television today. These questions, of vital importance for both media scholars and television critics, pose opportunities for increased conversation between critics and scholars.

As I researched the critics from the 1970s, I tried to find contemporary examples of the sort of work it seemed the 1970s critics aspired towards—a type of criticism that envisioned television as more than an entertainment medium. To test a theory when I interviewed Noel Holston, I asked him if he thought Jon Stewart of *The Daily Show* could be considered a television critic. Holston pondered for a moment and replied, “there is a larger cultural criticism that basically stems from standing up for what you think are good, intelligent, reasonable values. And you basically don’t say, the acting was good, or the delivery of this newscast was good. You take a moral stance, and that is what Stewart does.” While certain aspects of Stewart’s program—for example, that it is a comedy program—perhaps positions him rather differently from the print critics I’ve studied in this dissertation, I think Holston’s “moral stance” opens up entirely new realms for critical discourse. Television, in its multiplicity as an entertainment medium, a regulated industry, and a constantly expanding visual technology invites critics to infuse their commentary with a political edge, defining “political” broadly as those issues that feature a “struggle for power in society,” a definition derived from Joseph Turow and Matthew P. McAllister’s work on advertising and consumer culture.<sup>43</sup>

Alyssa Rosenberg’s writing for *ThinkProgress.com*, a non-profit think tank, serves as one example of a new model of television criticism: her work is inherently political, through the mission of the site and through Rosenberg’s own history as a labor reporter. She also defines her

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<sup>43</sup> Joseph Turow and Matthew P. McAllister, *The Advertising and Consumer Culture Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2009). 7.

objects of analysis broadly, commenting frequently about video games and other pop cultural media. TV, however, remains at the heart of seventy percent of her content because “It is where a lot of the most interesting cultural production is happening right now.”<sup>44</sup> Despite her conscious political framing, Rosenberg’s work about television ultimately shares with Noel Holston’s an approach grounded in a desire to facilitate a deeper interpretation of media. She explained, “I hope that people engage with the material that they are consuming, critically. I hope my work helps people bring meaning to the stuff that they are consuming, that it is a place to discuss ideas.” Because the comment function on websites has facilitated conversation between critics and readers, the time has never been more ripe for an expansion of the sort of politically-engaged work of a critic like Rosenberg, who envisions television not only as a reflection of culture but also as a significant force that shapes it.

I asked the critics with whom I spoke what they saw for TV criticism in the future. Howard Rosenberg was optimistic, even though he regretted that the *Los Angeles Times* dropped criticism of local news after he retired in 2003. Rosenberg noted, “You know, I’ve read some really smart pieces online, so I think [TV criticism] is going to get better,” but he could not answer with similar surety that criticism would remain a full-time gig. Noel Holston was less optimistic, ascribing to the contemporary critic less influence: “Decidedly less. Although it is different. The sense of mission and being the white knight for the unrepresented, unfulfilled viewer has kind of been washed away by the sheer volume of things available.” By “sheer volume,” Holston may have meant that with the wide variety of content now available, every niche audience can likely find what s/he desires—making the critic’s intercession as an advocate for program diversity less necessary. One could argue that the critic’s work has become niche in

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<sup>44</sup> I interviewed Alyssa Rosenberg (no relation to Howard Rosenberg) on June 20, 2012 for another project about gender and criticism, but some of her comments seemed relevant here.

itself—a particular approach to television viewing that idealizes programs of narrative and thematic complexity, the types of programs than can sustain weekly interrogation. Holston also highlights the leveling of the relationship between the critic and reader—the critic’s authority has not only been somewhat diminished by the explosion of easy content distribution but also by the fact that the critic is no longer the sole voice in the wilderness of the web.

David Bianculli has created his own brand of criticism for the digital age through his website *TV Worth Watching*. As such, he has a personal stake in the future directions of the profession. While he now teaches at a local university, he still works as a critic for National Public Radio and for his website. From Bianculli’s perspective, the future of criticism is unclear: “I *really* don’t know where tomorrow’s critics are going to be most valued. Somebody’s always got to be the arbiter. That’s why I’m betting on my own website...whom do you trust about what’s really the best?” One of the unique values of his site is that he has recruited a wide range of experienced critics to write for it. His experienced bloggers, including Noel Holston and Eric Mink, each offer more than twenty years experience as TV critics, so their opinions about the programs most worth watching today feature a historical perspective relatively underrepresented in contemporary criticism. Bianculli’s critics are often retired, so Bianculli’s site allows them to flex their critical muscles again, without the deadline pressures of their past professional lives. Having witnessed the gradual explosion of television channels and the consolidation of the industry into a few corporate hands, critics like Holston can not only address the way programs have evolved over the years but also how television’s significance to our culture has intensified now that screens surround us, travel in our pockets, and otherwise dominate the spaces in which we live and work.

### 5.3 *The Legacy of the TV Critic*

Again and again, I found that the critics with whom I spoke were incredulous about why I would want to talk with them. They were not resistant because of privacy concerns but rather because they could not understand why an academic would want to learn more about their work. Moreover, I detected a bit of sadness, even loss, as each spoke of their departures from the business. Some had been vilified, like Tom Shales,<sup>45</sup> while others, like Howard Rosenberg, simply regretted the loss of prominence the position provided:

I knew I was done, but the only time I regret it, is when, and I knew this was going to happen...that your phone would stop ringing. It wasn't me that people were calling...It wasn't me that people were fearing. It was the *Los Angeles Times*. The *Los Angeles Times* had the power. By myself I was like, nothing. And three years after when something you've written about becomes news, they don't call you, they call somebody else. That kind of thing, even though I knew it would happen, has bothered me.

Both Tom Shales and Howard Rosenberg won Pulitzer Prizes for their criticism, yet by the time they left their posts in 2010 and 2003 respectively, the industry had changed around them. Rosenberg described flying business class every time he travelled for the paper. Tom Shales worked at the *Post* during the two years that Sander Vanocur was employed by the *Post* as TV Editor for a rumored income of \$85,000, then an astronomical sum for a TV critic.<sup>46</sup> Those times of the flush newspaper industry are long gone. But in their concern that they were unable to provide for me knowledge of any value, it seemed critics were most worried that their legacy

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<sup>45</sup> Tom Shales has been relatively open about his financial difficulties, having lost his home to foreclosure. The following article also notes how bitter was his split from his newspaper of almost forty years. Ben Widdicombe, "Axed Critic Gives Publisher Some Unsocial Media," *Gatecrasher*, March 29 2012.

<sup>46</sup> It was Howard Rosenberg who cited the \$85K figure. For his part, Shales remembered Vanocur as a great mentor who let Shales do what he wanted to do, with little interference. My larger point, however, is that newspapers had money to burn, and they invested in their TV divisions.

offered relatively little.

The critics I interviewed have found our nation's universities the most hospitable place for them to retire from the daily TV beat. Noel Holston, now affiliated with the University of Georgia, saw the writing on the wall in 2005 at the last print publication at which he worked, *Newsday*. He cited the reduced status of the newspaper industry as one motivation for his retirement: "I also was concerned about the future of the newspaper. It was quite frankly better for me to get out under my own terms, than it would have been if I had hung around and gotten downsized out of my job." Eric Mink teaches film at Webster University in St. Louis. David Bianculli is hoping to receive tenure soon at Rowan University in New Jersey, where he teaches courses on the history of television. Howard Rosenberg teaches at the University of Southern California. All of these men, who worked their entire professional lives on the TV beat, have now found that their experience and knowledge has been particularly valued within the nation's universities.

As this study has shown, TV scholars should pay more attention to the work of these critics. There are vast, interconnected, archives that could be developed locally from collecting the papers, videos, and memories of these critics.<sup>47</sup> Local archives of critical papers speak to specific regional contexts, showing the distribution patterns of programs (both national and local), documenting how producers engaged with local critics, and evidencing local production efforts, achievements, and failures. Because the critic is a middleman, his/her work may at times stand as a counter for the official discourses disseminated by network executives and other powerful figures long accustomed to controlling the narrative. Certainly, at other times, the

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<sup>47</sup> Howard Rosenberg maintains a library of the VHS and other format videos that he was sent as screeners. David Bianculli's dad kept a clip collection, and Bianculli has built off of that foundation. This information will be incomplete, but it could also disappear entirely if scholars do not let critics know of our interest.

critic has contributed to the dominant narratives disseminated by the powerful, for reasons that may be unique to each critic. Critical discourse is a research source that has always been central to television studies, yet the methods we have applied thus far to account for this work largely have employed critics as secondary source rather than as primary sources for research. There is much work that can be done if we consider how critics' voices intersect, overlap, or diverge at key historical moments. Moreover, scholars can work with critics as partners to understand better what television has meant, and what it could mean for the future.



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## APPENDICES

### *Appendix A: Tables*

Table 1: TV Critics Referenced and Interviewed: Professional Affiliations

<b>TV Critic</b>	<b>Print Publication</b>	<b>1st of 2nd generation</b>	<b>Years of Employment as a Critic</b>
David Bianculli	Gainesville Sun / Ft. Lauderdale News / Akron Beacon Journal / The Philadelphia Inquirer / The New York Post / New York Daily News / NPR's "Fresh Air"	2nd Generation	1975-1977 / 1977-1980 / 1980-1983 / 1983-1987 / 1987-1993 / 1993-2007 / 1987-Today
Les Brown	Variety / New York Times	1st Generation	1961-1974 / 1974-1977
John Carmody	Washington Post	2nd Generation	1977-1998
Gary Deeb	Chicago Tribune	2nd Generation	1973-1980
Jack Gould	New York Times	1st Generation	1944-1972
Noel Holston	Orlando Sentinel / Minneapolis-St. Paul Star Tribune / Newsday	2nd Generation	1968-1975/ 1975-2001/ 2001-2005
Dave Kaufman	Variety	1st Generation	1951-1990
Lawrence Laurent	Washington Post	1st Generation	1950-1982
Lee Margulies	Los Angeles Times	2nd Generation	1976-today
Eric Mink	St. Louis Post-Dispatch / New York Daily News	2nd Generation	1979-1993 / 1993-2003
John J. O'Connor	New York Times	2nd Generation	1971-1997
Clarence Petersen	Chicago Tribune	2nd Generation	1969-1973
Howard Rosenberg	Louisville Courier / Los Angeles Times	2nd Generation	1971-1978 / 1978-2003
Tom Shales	Washington Post	2nd Generation	1972 -2010
Cecil Smith	Los Angeles Times	1st Generation	1953-1982
Sander Vanocur	Washington Post	2nd Generation	1975-1977



Table 2: Prime Time Access Rule [PTAR] Timeline

March 1970	FCC Chairman Burch appears on ABC's <i>Issues and Answers</i> , suggests Westinghouse Broadcasting's plan is better option than 50-50 Plan
April 1970	FCC releases a draft of Prime Time Access Rules
May 1970	PTAR enacted in 5-2 vote, despite Chairman Burch's objections
July 1970	Justice Department announces that it supports the Group W Plan
August 1970	CBS files appeal of PTAR in NY Second Court of Appeals
October 1970	FCC stays syndication portion of rule until Oct 1972
October 1970	FCC adds exemption for off-network reruns for one year
October 1970	NY Second Appeals Court refuses to stay the rules, but agrees to expedite appeal
January 1971	Oral arguments before NY Second Appeals Court
March 1971	FCC sends "extraordinary" letter encouraging 8 p.m. PTAR start hour
May 1971	NY Second Appeals Court upholds PTAR (unanimous)
June 1972	FCC enforces the Financial Interest and Syndication portion of the PTAR rules
October 1972	FCC announces notice of inquiry and rulemaking to revise PTAR—comments invited
January 1974	FCC passes PTAR
June 1974	NY Second Court of Appeals stays new PTAR II
July 1974	FCC invites more comments on PTAR II
October 1974	FCC issues PTAR III

## Appendix B: Figures

Display Ad 78 -- No Title  
New York Times (1923-Current file): Nov 30, 1972.  
ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The New York Times (1851-2008)  
pg. 38

**This program is so beautiful, it has to die.**

That was, as you will see, the strange verdict pronounced by many television critics about a new series, "The Waltons".

The audience reaction has been unusual, too. Little children get all smiley and waxy about it, the way they do for things like My Friend Flicka, Little Women, and the Cookie Monster stabbing his toe.

But from there on up in age and sophistication, overt emotions disappear. To be replaced by little smiles of recognition. An occasional gale. Red eyes.

And in grown men, funny little sounds and fumbings in the dark, designed to hide the fact that a man is doing something as "unmanly" as being moved by a tender, sentimental story.

We at CBS would like to tell you what "The Waltons" is all about, but it won't be easy. Because everything we tell you can turn you off. If you relate it to similar programs with similar themes.

"The Waltons" is different. Not because it isn't "with it" and it isn't cutesy. Which it isn't. Not because it isn't exciting. Which it is. But because it's an honest attempt to portray a particular kind of American family during a particular time in history.

The Waltons are a large family. Seven children, the eldest eighteen, the youngest six. A mother and father. A grandmother and grandfather. Even a dog. Not a heroic Lassie dog. Not a funny, mangy dog. A dog dog.

And it's about the 1930's Depression days. In the Blue Ridge Mountains of Virginia. The family is poor. One of the kids plays the harmonica. And it's all about how they all face life.

And that's what makes the Waltons special. *The kind of life they face.*

It has the feel of truth. The look, the texture. You can believe that there were people like this who led lives like this during times like these.

You can believe that maybe this was really how it was to grow up in tough country during tough times. How it really was to be part of a big, loving family.

It's about people who love each other, and love others. About people who care for their aged as well as their young.

And it's funny, too, because it's about a sprawling family of bright, vital individualists.

But it isn't puppy-cute. It isn't pat. And each program doesn't tightly package a moral, like a fortune cookie.

Though there is a moral, overall. Life can be tough. It can also be beautiful. Not easy. Beautiful.

"The Waltons" is on Thursdays. Opposite that funny man, Flip Wilson. And the exciting action show, "The Mod Squad".

It will remain alive until the end of this season, because some people here at CBS believe that there are enough of us around -- even in this super-sophisticated day and age -- who can still respond to some old-fashioned notions like respect, and dignity, and love. Who aren't embarrassed by an honest lump in the throat.

If there are enough of us, "The Waltons" may even fool the critics and live next year. Watch "The Waltons" tonight, for a change. It may bring out the best in you. It did in us.

...a family in which people, real people, talk to one another. There's respect here and affection openly displayed, and both young and old have their own dignity."

It's easy to get wrapped up with The Waltons. They happen to be real people."

Breaks all the rules. Except one: It's entertaining."

Quite wonderful in every respect, beautiful in its coloring up of a mere innocent day, poignant in its relationships, a perfect gem of a tale."

Probably will compare with the few great ones of television history."

Might be the best show commercial television has produced in years."

**Save "The Waltons"**  
See them tonight at 8:00 on Channel 2.

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Figure 1: The Waltons Ad

**Michael is the mother on 'The Waltons'**

By Lawrence Laurent



The glamorous Michael Learned

Ms. Learned reporting to work.

Michael as Olivia Walton.

Figure 2: Three views of Michael Learned

[illegible]

Figure 4: Los Angeles Times 'Holocaust' Feature

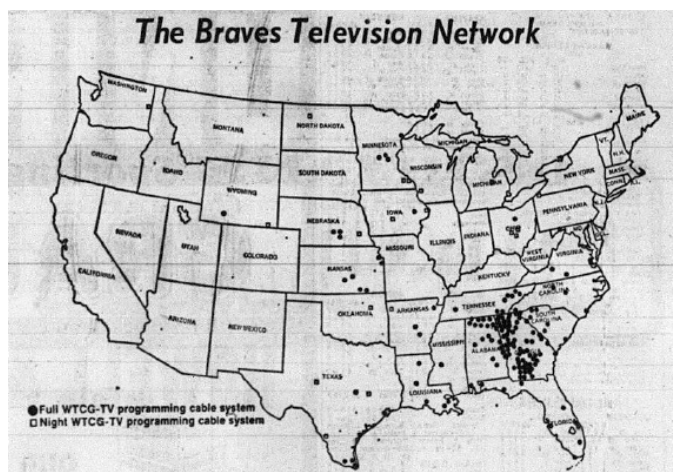


Figure 5: Map of WTCG National Reach



Figure 6: Teleprompter WTCG Ad

**WTBS - THE SUPERSTATION FROM ATLANTA!**  
**THETA CABLE TV HAS IT!**  
 See the entire National League—including the Los Angeles Dodgers!

Baseball from everywhere via WTBS, Atlanta.

If you're a baseball fan, Theta Cable TV is like heaven. WTBS, the famous Atlanta Superstation, features baseball like you've never seen it. A 68-game season schedule... **live!**

The Braves battle the entire National League, "away" as well as "at home". And you'll catch the excitement as it happens, but **only** if you are a Theta Cable subscriber!

**PLUS THE ATLANTA CHIEFS**

A 7-game live schedule of the Atlanta Chiefs of the North American Soccer League brings this spectacular sport to your living room. It's one of the fastest-growing spectator sports in America and Theta Cable brings it to you via WTBS.

**WTBS and Theta Cable TV—where the sports action is!**

**829-6711**  
 Santa Monica, Beverly Hills, West Los Angeles, West Hollywood

**254-6131**  
 Los Feliz, Eagle Rock, Highland Park & Hollywood East of the Freeway

**501-2000**  
 Sherman Oaks, Bel Air, Beverly Glen, Studio City, Hollywood  
 \*Dodger away games only.

**THETA CABLE TV**

You're Lucky to Live in Thetaland.  
 Theta Cable Television  
 P.O. Box 25990  
 Los Angeles, CA 90025

Figure 7: Theta WTCG Ad #1

**Theta adds a superstation at no extra cost.**

**Channel 17/D  
 WTBS/Atlanta  
 Superstation**

**Theta Cable TV has more for you than any other subscription system!**

If you're a Theta subscriber, pick up a free bonus—24-hour sports, movies and news from Atlanta's famous Super Station. Now it's yours along with other Super Satellite Channels. Plus Theta's clear reception of local VHF and UHF channels! They make Theta the biggest subscription bargain in town. And the best reason for you to order now!

**Coming up in October on Channel D in L.A., Channel J in Ontario—**

Oct. 1—Braves vs. Astros, 5:30 PM  
 Oct. 2—Braves vs. Astros, 5:30 PM  
 Oct. 3—Braves vs. Reds, 5:00 PM (airplay at 10 PM)  
 Oct. 5—Braves vs. Reds, 11:00 AM

**829-6711**  
 Santa Monica, West Los Angeles, Beverly Hills, West Hollywood

**254-6131**  
 Los Feliz

**501-2000**  
 Sherman Oaks, Bel Air, Beverly Glen, Studio City, Hollywood  
 \*Dodger away games only.

**714-983-9685**  
 Ontario, Laguna Hills, and North Hollywood

**THETA CABLE TV**

Theta Cable Television  
 P.O. Box 25990  
 Los Angeles, CA 90025

You're Lucky to Live in Thetaland.

Figure 8: Theta WTCG Ad #2



Figure 9: Ryan's Chicago Tribune Archive